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THE  
SEEN & UNSEEN  
in Browning

BY  
EMMA J. BURT



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These Essays are dedicated to  
my dear Niece and Nephews  
M. K. B., J. B. B. & A. S. B.





## NOTE

THESE Essays were originally written for a literary society in North London and are now published by request, in the hope that they may convey to a larger circle some helpful thoughts of the strength and comfort which are sometimes unperceived in the Poems of England's great Poet, Robert Browning.





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# THE MUSICIAN



# THE MUSICIAN

**G**EORGE JOS: VOGLER was a real personage. He was born at Würzburg in 1749, and at a very early age showed a decided talent for music. Encouraged by his father, he gradually gave himself up to it as his life's work and when about twenty-two years old, was sent to Italy by the Elector Karl Theodor, who had been captivated by his youthful compositions, to study under the immediate direction of the Italian masters.

While at Rome, he was ordained a priest, but two years later, in 1773, he returned to Mannheim where he was appointed Court Chaplain and Chapel-Master and where he established his first musical school. He appears to have been a man of many original ideas. He carried out various musical reforms, thought out a new Theory of Music and a new scheme of organ building. Finally, before he was forty, he had invented and constructed a new instrument on the lines of the organ, called an orchestrion, on which he performed with such brilliancy as to attain extraordinary celebrity. He was, moreover, greatly fascinated by the History of music and found time to wander into many lands, searching for old forms of pure national melody.

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In this quest he visited Southern and Eastern Europe, penetrated into Africa and Asia, and even travelled as far north as Greenland.

He was, in fact, an enthusiast in music, as well as a great organist, and it is interesting by the way to remember, that while he was thus busied in the peaceful avocations of advancing his beloved Art, Europe was in the throes of the immense political upheaval, following upon the French Revolution of 1789; and that he was living almost in the centre of the current of the Napoleonic armies which swept through and over Germany, on their way to and from the disaster at Moscow. Indeed, the great battles of Jena and Leipsic were fought at no great distance from his home, and the vibrations of the thunders of the guns must have mingled with those of his organ.

About 1807 or 1808, in the midst of these stirring events, he opened his third and most famous musical school at Darmstadt and numbered among his students Weber and Meyerbeer, by whom he was greatly beloved even to the last, when, still faithfully at work and genial and pleasant as ever, he died suddenly of apoplexy in 1814. A man of so many and various ideas and attainments as he undoubtedly was, could scarcely avoid making enemies as well as friends, and we are told that amongst others, Mozart was strongly prejudiced against him. But all, both



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friends and foes agreed that he was a wonderful performer; yet, strange to say, his theories are now absolutely forgotten, and his compositions have vanished. Yet he too was one of the great multitude of Artists who, according to Ritter in his *History of Music*, surrendered their lives to the evolution of the ideas of beauty which God gave them. Right through the history of man from the days of Jubal to these modern times, men have lived and worked for Art, have toiled and suffered for it, and the three-fold pathway of literature, painting and music has been made firm and sound over the innumerable lives laid willingly down, of a great company of heroes, who, like Abt Vogler are now mostly forgotten. It is comparatively only a few—indeed a very few—who have been strong enough to pass over that silent roadway of dead hopes, ambitions, and aspirations, into the illuminated land of immortal memory and undying fame.

But the name and fame of Abt Vogler have been happily rescued and brought out of obscurity by one who heard the call of his genius across the chasm of a hundred years, and we have in this poem the resuscitation of a transient glory which will now accrue to the Abbé Vogler so long as Browning himself holds his own.

In view of this, how profoundly interesting are

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the thoughts and words with which the Poet has invested the Musician into whose inmost soul he has projected himself, in order to reveal it to a new generation and to become the mouthpiece of a message of consolation to all the successors of those who, though great in their own time, were nevertheless not great enough to hold the future in bondage. To these he especially says:

*There shall never be one lost good . . .  
All we have willed or hoped or dreamed of  
good shall exist;  
Not its semblance, but itself;  
no beauty, nor good, nor power  
Whose voice has gone forth, but each survives . . .*

Surely this is an immense declaration! One asks oneself, is it true? And if it is true, is it so only for the intellectual giant and the genius? Robert Browning asserts it as a truth for all! Good is eternal! It is power in man derived from the Divine itself, and we have no gauge by which to measure its relative value, since all unknown to her, the Widow's farthing headed that memorable subscription 2,000 years ago.

*It is not what a man does, but what he would do.*

What he has the will to do and if, as Buffon says, 'Genius is only the supreme capacity for taking pains,' or according to Matthew Arnold, 'mainly an affair of

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energy,’ then some measure of real success is within the reach of all—of all that is, who are whole-hearted and in earnest. Where then need come in that failure, which has caused so many tears, crippled so many brains and broken so many hearts?

The message of hope is to everyone, whether he be remembered or forgotten by his fellows, who helps to make the roadway to perfection by one deed, thought, or desire for good!

*Enough that God heard it once, we shall hear it  
by-and-bye.*

Robert Browning is frequently blamed for carelessness in the working up of his writings; he leaves them, we are told, and often, perhaps, with truth, too much in the rough. Viewed strictly from the literary aspect there is no doubt, that had he regarded the forms of poetical style as Tennyson did, he would have been more widely read and admired and much better understood, at any rate superficially. As it is the student of his works must bring of his own life, to the elucidation of the more or less hidden treasure, for as he himself has said:

*It is the taught already that profit by teaching;*

and there is no teaching like life’s experience.

One sometimes wonders if those who criticize are sure that had they been in his case, they could

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themselves have chained up that mighty intellect, that pouring torrent of thoughts, or controlled any better that great heart full to overflowing with human interest and sympathy, or that memory, which it has been said, 'was like the British Museum itself.'

The critic, if he be honest and unprejudiced is a valuable asset to all Art—but the Artist, who as Ritter says, 'is born into the world with a great and magical power to translate the beauty which his mind perceives in the abstract, into form, sight and sound, which his senses and those of others can recognize . . . is of far greater value, not only to Art, but to the world at large.' But with regard to the soliloquy of Abt Vogler, difficult and obscure as in parts it undoubtedly is, both the difficulty and obscurity are less in the style than in the ethereal nature of the thoughts. Indeed, so slightly is it dramatized as to be scarcely more than a marvellous process of emotional and religious thought. Here Browning holds us, by no external or objective bond, but by a power, which is almost absolutely that of the subconscious entity we call by the name of soul.

An elderly man seated at an organ of an old-fashioned form, is the only object in the picture we have given. It is true, that in imagination we can fill up a few details. We can see a large and venerable

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head with an auriolate of grey white hair falling on to the sloping shoulders. We can see a slightly rounded and finely featured face, with an expression at once grave and genial. Eyes intense and far seeing—eyes, in fact, which are seeing what the mind’s ears are hearing—what the heart is feeling and translating into mental imagery, both fantastic and exquisite and which the full and supple hands are transmitting into the outer world.

It is into this man’s subconsciousness, therefore, that the Poet has imagined himself, by means of his wonderful power of insight born of an intensity of sympathy, or in modern parlance, possibly through telepathic communion with a soul still living, still remembering and perhaps still desiring to express itself to its fellows on earth, though no longer itself upon the earth plane.

We are told in a preparatory note that Abt Vogler was extemporizing on his organ and forthwith, we are called to enter at once into the inmost of his mind and to hear him thinking in consonance with the music, which shapes itself before the eyes of his soul, into the semblance of a marvellous edifice of surpassing beauty.

The faculty of true improvization is a rare gift. It belongs, not to the ordinary and objective self, but to that underlying and still mysterious Ego, of which

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we are acutely aware only in times of what we term excitement, and which depends for its expression not on mere talent, but on some subtle mental, emotional or spiritual state of its recipient. The exponents of the arts have it in possibility, because the artistic temperament lends itself especially to the subjective; and probably the majority of those who possess it, at some moment in their lives, respond in a greater or lesser degree to an unforeseen, but immediate contact with some stronger and less material influence than ordinarily sways them.

The first stage of improvization seems given to us in the words of the poet Wordsworth when he writes:

*Thou that canst think as well as feel,  
Mount from the Earth. Aspire! Aspire!*

It is the forgetting of self, in the upward regard of the soul.

The second stage is a consciousness of that ascent and is beautifully described by Tennyson:

*He lifts me to the golden doors,  
The flashes come and go,  
All Heaven bursts her starry floors  
And straws her lights below,  
And deepens on and up. The Gates roll back!*

And Browning himself seems to express the completion of the mind's rapture when he writes:



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*Earth breaks up. Time drops away—  
In flows Heaven with its new day  
Of endless life.*

In an old and revered Book we read of eyes and ears being alike opened, which assuredly are not those of the physical body, and it is exactly the opening of these eyes and ears of the Soul, or real Self, which allows sights and sounds from the other side of this life's boundary, to become visible and audible—first to the Artist and then through him to all who care to look and listen, by means of the ordinary channels of the ocular and auditory nerves.

Thus Abt Vogler sings:

*All through my keys that gave their sounds to a  
wish of my Soul,  
All through my Soul that praised, as its wish  
flowed visibly forth,  
All through music and me! . . .*

When therefore we hear that Abt Vogler was extemporizing, we understand that, being in a fitting attitude of mind, musical sounds or tone forms were arranging and combining themselves in his brain, without conscious volition on his part and were flowing into and expressing themselves through him, in hitherto unheard melody.

But although according to the Poet and the scientist these melodies may still survive ‘when

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Eternity affirms the conception of an hour'—our ears are too dulled and confused by 'Earth's many voices,' to hear even the smallest echo of their refrain and thus we come to be dependent on the sister Arts and must content ourselves with the pictorial presentment of it, in the words of the poet, who himself sees it, 'as in a vision.'

Arriving at the consideration of the poem itself, we find it full of curious allusions, of deep suggestions and of wide appreciation and knowledge of Music; while beyond the beauty of its form and of the rhythm which charms the ear apart from the understanding, the spirit of the Poet's thought lifts the mind upwards to high spiritual eminences or lies hidden in the heart of a few words awaiting the response of that of the reader.

Taking the poem as a whole, the main current of thought appears to divide itself into three parts, which, though not virtually distinct are sufficiently so for purposes of analysis.

*The Building of the Palace of Music*      Stanzas 1-5

*The Song of Exultation*      „      6-7

*The Return to Earth*

It may seem to many that to analyse such lines as Browning here gives us is like the dissection of some wondrous flower, or the dragging of something sacred into the common day; yet the flower unfolded

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will reveal new beauties enshrouded within its petals and the sacred is none the less sacred, if the eyes which look upon it are reverent and loving.

I. The Building of the Palace. In the first stanza the old organist has yielded himself to the oncoming influx of the spirit of music, and as the sounds become audible to him, so does the Building of the Palace begin to rise and grow into form before him, and the very keys and stops of the beloved instrument he touches appear to him, to be, as it were, embodiments of service, living creatures, who are subject to him, and who visibly lay the foundations and raise the structure of the heavenly building.

This calling of the organ keys to serve him at a wish conveyed through his touch, suggests to the Poet the thought of the mythical Solomon or Suliman, who possessed, it is said, a wonderful Ring or Talisman, which being engraved with the great Name of God, was powerful to enforce service from all created beings.

The Muslims were taught to believe in three species of created Intelligences:

Angels created of light—Genii created of Fire—Man created of earth, and apparently Man, through the power of Suliman as the possessor of the wonder working and all-powerful Ring, had command over the Angels and the Genii of all grades and could on

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occasions bring them to his aid. And here in this myth, is there not a vague forecast of some higher and purer faith? The real origin of Suliman is uncertain, probably unknown and he is frequently confounded with King Solomon of Jewish History, the great wisdom possessing Sovereign who knew all things, even to the language of the hyssop on the wall. The two may be identical, but either way, it seems here shadowed forth, that Man, the third created form, and apparently the weakest, was endowed with power, through a superior human medium, over spirits of light and fire. This has a very interesting connexion with the teaching of the great German Mystic, Jacob Boehme, born near Görlitz in 1575, who writes of the Light world, the Fire world and of this world, which, lying between the two first, is both in Light and Fire, that is, both in good and evil and whose inhabitants can, in the Power of the Name or Nature of God, come into communion with either, being by the Almighty Will, placed in equilibrium between them, with freedom in the Great Name, to command the evil of the Fire world or avail themselves of the aid of that of the Light.

. . . as when Solomon willed  
*Armies of angels that soar, legions of demons that lurk,*  
 . . .  
*Should rush into sight at once, as he named the Ineffable*  
*Name,*  
*And pile him a palace straight . . .*

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Next he tells us of the unselfness of their work, of the separate tones and combinations into chords, and how the deep bass notes boomed with the subdued roar of many footsteps, many movements in the Depth, where the Palace was to be founded, ‘solidly, fearlessly’ :—

. . . . *broad on the roots of things*  
before it should rise in

. . . *rampired walls of gold as transparent as glass.*  
And is there not here a suggestion of the foundation of all things? Are not our scientists trying to follow back and again back into the awful bass forces of Nature and Life, to find out where and how they are grounded? Upon what underlying power the Palace of Life rises in such forms of beauty and strength, as we even now can recognize?

*Ab, one and all, how they helped, would dispart now,  
and now combine,  
Zealous to hasten the work, heighten their master  
his praise!  
And one would bury his brow with a blind plunge  
down to hell,  
Burrow awhile and build, broad on the roots of  
things,  
Then up again swim into sight, having based me my  
palace well  
Founded it, fearless of flame, flat on the nether  
springs.*

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The 'Nether Springs'. Here again we must journey eastwards into the Land of Imaginings and listen anew to the Science of the old Arabian Theology.

According to this teaching, a great Angel holds up the seven earths on his shoulders, and beneath him, is a perforated rock of ruby, from whence issue seas. Under this rock, stands an immense bull, who in his turn is supported by an enormous fish, called Bahamoot, whose name suggests the twisting water-spout, the Behemoth of the Hebrews. This fish or sea monster has for his support water—the *Nether Springs*, beneath which comes the darkness impenetrable, the abyss of the unknown, the womb of earth, and, continues the account: 'the knowledge of man fails as to what is below the darkness but it is generally believed to be the seven stages of Hell',—that is, Chaos!

Then from the Depths the music rises and rises like Shelley's skylark and so also the Palace grows in beauty.

*Higher still and higher  
From the earth thou springest,  
Like a cloud of fire,  
The blue deep thou wingest,  
And singing still dost soar, and soaring ever singest.*

Every crescendo giving way and melting before the



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next, to allow a fresh outburst of melody to lead on and up to ‘the pinnacled glory’ of the highest Hallelujah.

*Eager to do and die, yield each his place to the rest:  
For higher still and higher . . .*

*Up, the pinnacled glory reached, and the pride of  
my soul was in sight.*

*In sight? Not half! . . .*

Instantly the ideal expands: ‘Ah! but a man’s reach should exceed his grasp, or what’s a heaven for?’ asserts Andrea del Sarto.

*In sight? Not half! for it seemed, it was certain, to  
match man’s birth,  
Nature in turn conceived, obeying an impulse as I;*

for it is not the individual soul, but the world-soul that calls out to the Infinite, and in calling draws Nature with it! It is not men but Man, not the unit merely but the race, that holds out dumb hands for help and knowledge, and the response is quick—at once:

*. . . the emulous heaven yearned down, made effort  
to reach the earth*

as a tender nurse stoops towards the woman who shall be a mother and the feeble hands are caught and a whisper goes forth, for:

*. . . God has a few of us, whom he whispers in the ear.*

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The poet is always somewhat of a prophet. He sees and interprets to us who are still purblind, what he beholds, and possibly tells us sometimes more than he himself at the moment fully understands.

Robert Browning lived at the beginning of an age when whisper after whisper of God is reaching us. A whisper here and there, and we began to learn how to harness the wonders of electricity. A whisper in the laboratory and we began to see through the solid and to find it next to nothing. Another whisper and a young man sent messages without visible means. Another—this time to a woman across the Channel—and there came news of a wondrous substance endued with endless energy and inherent heat. And now the hidden spring of Flight is amongst our daily interests.

. . . *the pride of my soul was in sight?*  
. . . *Not half!* . . .

Who shall guess what secrets the great loving Creator has yet to tell the children who cluster round his knee? 'Tell us more,' cries Science. 'Tell us of ourselves, of our life, our origin'—and a deeper, stiller voice in the silence of the world soul prays, 'Tell us of Thyself.' Are not these 'Novel Splendours,' 'Meteor Moons,' 'Balls of blaze'? Shall there be a 'point or peak' upon the Palace which will not one day 'find and fix its wandering Star'?

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Already we are quite accustomed to a touch that brings an instant light. X-Rays and wireless telegraphy are things of course. They ‘dwell’ with us, these useful servitors of the Great Solomon’s Ring.

Thus even Nature attains to Heaven and finds ‘nor near nor far’. But how much truer is this on the mental plane, when in our higher, purer states, we rise from Earth and the Spiritual claims us for a little while and we are lost in it, and time and space are not, and there again is ‘no more near nor far’.

And still the organ pours itself forth. Symphonies new and elusive mingle themselves with fleeting airs out of some dim past, perhaps before the world was. Sweet, enticing strains invite a longed-for life and lo! the Palace is inhabited!

*. . . for there wanted not who walked in the glare  
and the glow,  
Presences plain in the place; or, fresh from  
the Protoplast,  
Furnished for ages to come, when a kindlier wind  
should blow,’*

The seer is aware of the gradual forming into shapes of that mysterious primeval aliveness—of hitherto unconceived Spirit forms moving in measured cadences about the ‘rampired walls,’ fresh from the creative sources of all sounds. Thoughts and energies that for æons have been awaiting the perfect time for their embodiment, now

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*Lured . . . to begin and live in a house to their liking  
at last.*

There were others there too. Those of the Past recalled,—living melodies in which the rapt eyes of the old musician see once more

*Those angel faces smile  
Which he had loved long since and lost awhile.*

or as Browning says:

*. . . the wonderful Dead, who have passed through  
the body and gone,  
But were back once more to breathe in an old world  
worth their new;  
What never had been, was now; what was, as it shall  
be anon  
And what is,—shall I say, matched both? for  
I was made perfect too.*

And here the building of the Palace attains its height! The celestial music swells and rolls upon the ear, in the eternal Anthem of what was, and what shall be and what is! Here in the prophetic sight of the perfecting of the Human! In the Home-coming of the Prodigal, when the feast is being prepared and fine linen brought out and, best of all, when Man is breast to breast of his own free choice with his Father.

*For I—I was made perfect too.*

II. Thence we pass on with a fresh breath. In

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Stanzas six and seven, the Poet in the Soul of the old man at the organ sings the apotheosis of Music and this, he says, is:—

*All through my keys that gave their sounds to a  
wish of my soul,*

*All through my soul that praised as its wish  
flowed visibly forth,*

*All through music and me! . . .*

*But here is the finger of God, a flash of the will  
that can,*

*Existent behind all laws, that made them and,  
lo, they are!*

*And I know not if, save in this, such gift be  
allowed to man,*

*That out of three sounds he frame, not a fourth  
sound, but a star.*

*Consider it well: each tone of our scale in itself  
is nought;*

*It is everywhere in the world—loud, soft,  
and all is said:*

*Give it to me to use! I mix it with two in my thought:*

*And there! Ye have heard and seen: consider  
and bow the head!*

Three sounds and a star! Is this the Musician’s madness or the Poet’s license? Neither, it is a truth and one ‘we have heard and seen,’ and, adds Browning:

*consider and bow the head!*

and Mrs Browning, too, reminds us:

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*Earth's crammed with heaven  
And every common bush afire with God;  
But only he who sees—takes off his shoes.*

Again we must go to Jacob Boehme with whom Browning seems to have been well acquainted. Three is a mystic number. Three discrete forms of one principle mixed, or crossed, make, not a fourth principle but a Star!

In *The Professor at the Breakfast Table*, Oliver Wendell Holmes gives us the analysis of John.

There are three Johns, he says. There is first, John, whom John thinks he knows as his own internal self. Secondly, there is John, who is known to his friends and enemies, the external John, who speaks and acts and is judged accordingly; and again, there is John, who is known to his Maker both as he is in reality and as he appears to be,—but these three aspects of John do not make a fourth John but a mixed personality, a combination,—a Star!

The elucidation of the term 'Star' is to be found in Eastern lore. The Eastern mind is much more subjective than our Western mind. It sees not merely an object but what that object means and represents. The old Oriental with his physical eyes saw in the sky a Star, but with his mental eyes he saw a light which reveals. To him every secret of Heaven or Nature shown to Man is a Star—something made



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known—so in the Revelation, we read of One who holds in His Hand the Seven Stars, which to the initiated means that He holds in His Power the All and Everything of that which can be revealed.

As regards the assertion in the poem, it is quite true that ‘we have heard and seen’.

We have been told of the Music, of the Palace and of the Story of the two together. And the three great Arts of Music, Architecture and Poetry, mingled together as they are in this marvellous poem, make ‘not a fourth’ Art, but become an exponent, a Star, to reveal by means of Tone Form, Line Form, and Word Form, thoughts of beauty and profundity which would otherwise be hidden.

III. In Stanza eight begins the return of the Soul to Earth.

*Well, it is gone at last, the palace of music I reared;  
Gone! . . .*

and ‘the gone thing had to go’.

The Poet Keats echoes this:

*Was it a vision or a waking dream?  
Fled is that music; do I wake or sleep?*

And so Wordsworth also:

*Whither is fled the visionary gleam?  
Where is it now, the glory and the dream?*

They have all been through it! The Vision and the

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Rapture! And then the sting of the starting tears—  
the sadness of the fading beauty, the deep agony of  
the 'Never to be again'...

*For ever, never—Never, Forever.*

And we too, have we not had our smaller experiences,  
our visions and known the pain of

*The high that proved too high, the heroic for  
earth too hard,*

and of

*The passion that left the ground to lose itself in the sky.*

The shallow worldling says, 'To be sure.'

*Never to be again! but many more of the kind  
As good, nay, better perchance: ...*

Was there ever a mother, whose babe lay under the  
turf, who was really consoled by the thought of  
another yet unborn? Shall not the Divine in her still  
cry out for that one?

*Oh, for the touch of a vanished hand,  
And the sound of a voice that is still.*

If a man has a hundred sheep and one be gone astray,  
does he let the one sheep go? Browning scorns such  
mockery:

*... is this your comfort to me?*

*To me, who must be saved because I cling  
with my mind*

*To the same, same self, same love, same God:  
ay, what was, shall be.*

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*Therefore to whom turn I but to thee, the ineffable  
Name?*

*Builder and maker, thou, of houses not made  
with hands!*

*What, have fear of change from thee who art  
ever the same?*

*Doubt that thy power can fill the heart that  
thy power expands?*

And as one who knows, he adds:

*There shall never be one lost good! . . .*

for Good, that is, Love, is the great Power of God. ‘Evil,’ he continues presently, ‘is null, is nought.’ This assertion is startling—chiefly, perhaps, because we are accustomed to use the words ‘evil’ and ‘sin’ as interchangeable terms. Browning assuredly never intended to minimize sin.

As a generalization this assertion arouses many questions and some doubt, and one wishes that his thought had been more explicit, for he was a deep thinker and the genius of the Poet often flashes light into the otherwise impenetrable gloom.

Love to him is the true Power—God Himself—If then the Eternal Good is Power and Evil assumed to be its negative, what is the power of evil? Does it not follow that the so-called power of evil, is merely power attributed to it by man himself and otherwise is non-existent? Browning conceives of God as In-

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finite Love, which in Him is united to Infinite Wisdom. To man has been given the faculty of loving and also that of attaining to the knowledge of Truth. Both faculties necessitate education and training, because the will and especially the intellect are open to misapprehensions and this training according to Browning's idea can only be accomplished by the surmounting of obstacles, in the shape of contraries.

Browning, therefore, appears to say that evil is a perverted attitude of the mind—a nothingness, a delusion, one so fluid and devoid of fact that, as all know, what seems evil to one mind need not necessarily seem so to another, yet a necessity in view of human freedom of will, and an experience by means of which man may attain in the end to the true Good.

In this life's dark camera we see things upside down, in our ignorance we appear to see the Actual because our imagination plays us false. From time to time we lie down in that curious rehearsal of death we call Sleep, and some will dream, and the startling, the grotesque, ay, the impossible, will seem quite real and we shall be in it unsurprised until that moment when 'Phœbus' gins 'rise' and we are born again into the New Day and the phantasy so real and perchance so horrible, will be only 'the baseless fabric of a vision.' For the idea of evil, our Poet suggests, is founded on a lie—a misapprehen-

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sion of the Divine purpose of Love. At first, man's face was altogether turned towards the Good and True. He knew of nothing else, God was his All, and he was sure and confident as a child is confident, and he could not consciously realize his Selfhood as a danger as well as a glory; but as he grew out of infancy, in order that he might learn the realness of Good and Truth, and choose it of his own free choice, the Divine Wisdom permitted the delusion of evil to form itself before his mind.—When man, instead of rejecting the delusion accepted it, or, in Eastern language, ‘Ate it,’ and began to act upon it and to externalize his mistake in his life he lost his vision of the Divine Good, his mind became darkened and confused and his Selfhood turned and faced an imaginary fancied Good, which we now call Evil.

Thus, we may imagine, Evil became Man's reversed idea of Good. The false became his real and his Great Friend seemed to have become his enemy.

In the Mirror of the earthly and material we fancy we see the true substance. An old writer says to this effect:—

*I heard a Voice behind me and I turned and having turned I saw.*

Yes, saw once more the Glorious Face and Form of the Good and of the Truth. As once, in ignorance, man turned towards the False, so now must he turn

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again towards the True. Then, says Browning: 'Where is the Evil?' and he answers: 'It is null, it is nought.' It is behind us—in the hiddenness, and he adds: 'And for the Evil so much good more.' The very fact that we have experience of the awful realities of the sin and sorrow, the disease and death, which man's dire mistake has entailed upon us, will, one day, enhance beyond conception our conscious realization of the beauty of the Divine Form, we see once more, standing amongst the Trees in a new Eden. It is a matter of mental turning and Browning himself says:

*... to whom turn I but to thee, the ineffable Name?*

*. . . . .*

*What was good shall be good, with, for evil, so  
much good more;*

*On the earth the broken arcs; in the heaven,  
a perfect round.*

Broken arcs! How well this describes our human life! How puzzled we are by the inexplicable happenings, the unforeseen beginnings and endings—the meetings and the partings, the grey monotony at one time and the tragic changes at another—a bit of garden ground with Love, and anon a race, with fear and Death behind! How often life seems to us a mere confusion—a tangle of odds and ends, pointless, incomprehensible, meaningless! We are told

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that from the smallest fragment of a curved line, the mathematician can reconstruct the whole circle to which it belongs.

So of Earth’s broken arcs, shall we one day see the meaning, as the events now so mysterious are adjusted one by one, before our wondering, worshipping eyes and we see the growth of the ‘Perfect Round’ and know ‘He hath done all things well.’

In Stanza XI, Browning emphasizes yet another of his favourite ideas, closely connected with the preceding. It is the Doctrine of Contrasts or Complements and it runs all through life! It is as the convex to the concave. He asks:—

*And what is our failure here but a triumph’s  
evidence*

*Why else was the pause prolonged but that singing  
might issue thence?*

*Why rushed the discords in but that harmony  
should be prized?*

He held, ‘We fall to rise, are baffled to fight better, —sleep to wake.’ Always there is ‘somewhat to cast off, somewhat to become.’ Browning taught, writes Sir Henry Jones, ‘that human life is a moral process and the evolution of human character its deepest interest. Earth, to him, is to be a pupil’s place,’

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*And life, time—with all their chances changes  
Just probation space.*

To mould and spiritualize character is the object of all life's training and is accomplished by continuous effort. Therefore difficulties and obstacles there must be, though never such as are beyond man's faith and courage, and their final conquest in face of failure and defeat lifts him slowly both as an individual and a race to higher and higher levels. For Browning will not admit of irremediable failure. Failure is to him the spur which urges to greater efforts. He believes in the Everlasting Yea—the Divine Positive. He believes, moreover, in the Man, God made.

But the human mind cannot truly realize the Positive without an assumed complement or contrary which is its negative. We should never consciously enjoy light, were there no darkness. It is silence which gives consciousness of sound,—discord which teaches us the beauty of harmony and the dark background of a terrible mistake is throwing up for us throughout the ages, the ineffable Light of the Absolute Good. A negative, Browning seems to say, is a dream, a mirage, a phantasy and yet it is necessary for us, because by it, we become self-conscious and aware of what is, of the real, of the true and of the good.



## ‘ABT VOGLER’

Sin, suffering, doubt and Death are now stern realities to us, because by our thought we have created them and truly

*Sorrow is hard to bear and doubt is slow to clear*

They are the inevitable consequences of believing a delusion and the strength of learning this, is in the reversal. For we become like that of which we habitually think.

As, therefore, throughout the ages man has feared, loved or hated evil and allowed it to become real to him and a part of him, so must he now set the idea of it aside, and by looking steadfastly into and resolutely desiring and loving Divine Realities of Good—by holding to the Positive and the Love and ‘reckoning himself dead’ to the negations of evil, become gradually so impregnated, ay—so saturated by the Virtue of the Good he worships, that he shall hear no longer the hissing of the Serpent, but only the ‘Whisper of God’ and know even now as His Musicians know, that Suffering, Sorrow, Doubt and Death will one day pass away like shadows to be lost forever in the hiddenness of that spiritual Substance, which is Joy, Love, Life!

And so the vision fades! The old man’s hands have fallen from the keys! The organ loft is silent! The evening light falls dimly all around. But his soul comforts itself.

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*I will be patient and proud, and soberly acquiesce*

he says, for although the vision is hidden it is there and for always.

‘I will be patient and proud,’ for I hear about with me henceforth the knowledge of a greater life possessed, though not yet realized. ‘Give me the keys,’ he prays, with trembling fingers in the dark, I seek the Common Chord again. My soul floats downwards and I need the Old—the Known—the Everyday. Alas! I find it not! O God, I slide—I sink—‘I roll down into the Deep!’ Even so he who aspires must also fathom a corresponding Gulf! He who would gain the Good and True in God, must see also of the Evil and the False in self.

So says Abt Vogler, ‘Sliding by semitones, till I sink to the minor.’ Yes, and ‘blunt it into a ninth’—for within and through the Seraphic Song of Ascents, the Soul hears and must hear, the great bass undertones in this world of trouble and trial—the crying and the pain of the minor, the discord, the agony and the despair in the blunted dumbness of the Ninth.

From this ‘alien ground’ do we survey—the heights we ‘rolled from into the deep’ until the impulse comes to seek again, ‘The Common Chord,’ ‘the C Major of this life.’

## ‘ABT VOGLER’

The Resting place, the halfway House! ‘The cottage thro’ whose time-made chinks we see the stars’ and now and then perceive faint, far-off echoes of the Angels’ songs.

The climb upwards from the deep bass to the High C of the Celestial is long and steep and passes always through the Common Chord. Not upon the eagle-wings of Art, nor yet upon the great white Horses of the Intellect can man attain the Heavenly Abiding Place, but only on roughly sandalled feet, that try to force out music from the Organ pedals of the Everyday, in the kitchen, and the nursery, at the desk, or in the office—for

*The trivial round, the common task,  
Will furnish all we need to ask,  
Room to deny ourselves, a road  
To lead us daily nearer God’.*

The way of the Common Chord—‘The C Major of this life.’ This for the present is the ‘Resting Place’ until, waiting for the Glad To-morrow, we too, like Abt Vogler—sleep!



# THE STUDENT



# THE STUDENT

THE Poem entitled *The Grammarian's Funeral* is primarily a eulogy of knowledge and was evidently written at a time when the importance and value of knowledge was paramount in Browning's mind.

In conception and thought it is alike illuminative and beautiful and, according to Arthur Symons, the sudden changes from intense seriousness to flashes of the humorous and even of the grotesque are such as Browning alone can afford us.

Clear and simple in words and expression it embodies many of his favourite ideas respecting some of the deepest truths and problems of human life.

Its main theme is the assured hope of the soul's immortality, based on his view of the reasons of our sojourn here on earth, which for him included the development of a high ideal—the eternal progression of Truth in the human intellect and the death of the individual self, in the effort to realize its true Self in the wider life of humanity.

The dramatic occasion of the Poem is the funeral of a great and learned Scholar of the early Renaissance period, whose body a band of his devoted students are in the act of bearing shoulder high to a

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befitting burial place. The leader of the band is the speaker of the monologue and addresses his fellow bearers in praise and appreciation of their Master, interrupting himself occasionally to give them marching directions. It is to be noted here that these asides form in fact, a beautiful thread of symbolic allusions breaking through the main poem here and there like sparks of light. One of the most beautiful is that suggested by the thought, that will crop up sometimes as years pass into old age, that ways and manners wear out and new ones take their place, that our day is over, our dance finished. This would sound a note of sadness were it not for the Aside. Instantly the brave and hopeful spirit of Browning asserts itself and the order comes: 'Keep the Mountain side, Make for the city.'

'The day is not over,' he says, it is only beginning. Those on the Mountain side are climbing still and probably the steepest heights. Shall we slack off? Rather let us 'Hearten our chorus,' put on fresh vigour and 'Make for the City,'—that City of Truth on the Mountain top whose builder and maker is God. And as physical weariness increases, he adds: 'Caution redoubled. Step two abreast,' 'The way winds narrowly.' Yes—Two abreast, just because the way does wind narrowly and there is need of mutual sympathy and of mutual help. Only age



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can with assurance tell of that hope which is born of experience, so many dark days have befallen and yet the sun has shone again—so many heart breaks and still we smile.

These mystical threads of thought intertwined like the many coloured ribbons of the Maypole glint and glide, elusive yet present. The scenery suggested is also just as true a symbol of the Renaissance itself, just as true of the Grammarian’s own individual life, just as true of numberless lives now!

In his vision Browning sees the wide sleek, plain, broken by its silver rivers and long winding roads—its rich alluvial meadows and pastures diversified by towns and scattered villages. There they lie on the rolling levels stretching towards the distance where the ground rises and the foothills begin, and gradually the thinning morning mists disclose steep ascents—crags, terraces of rock, peaks rising one beyond another, the highest clothed in clouds still waiting for the sun to fully rise and disperse them.

Some great Lombardy plain, perhaps, where the inhabitants of the various homesteads sleep in the quiet comfort and safety of their surroundings.

How tranquil is the ordinary life of the unambitious soul! Eating, drinking, marrying, money-making, a little pleasure, some mild excitements and then a floating passage out of the monotonous into

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another sphere, scarcely thought of and almost quite unrealized.

This of 'the multitude below,' who

*Live, for they can, there.*

But with the few it is different, so the poet's interest centres on the little group of men who slowly climb the

*... tall mountain, citied to the top,  
Crowded with culture!*

for it is a symbolic journey. The mind of man, seeking new and higher things of thought and imagination, following as best it can the impulse to acquire fresh Truth. A new morning has dawned—an awakening has taken place and though the many sleep, there are those who are awake and ready.

Leaving, therefore, the townships still asleep on the plain, the little band of stalwart men sets out to climb the hillside, singing in chorus as they ascend and, as Mr Symons points out: 'the lines of the poem seem actually to move to the steady climbing rhythm of their feet,' while, to quote Mrs Sutherland Orr: 'they bear their Master to a mountain top that the loftiness of his endeavour may be symbolized by the last resting-place.'

It is thought by some that to understand Browning rightly, it must be kept in mind that he is not only a dramatic poet, but also a mystic. Dean Inge,

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in a chapter devoted to him in his *‘Studies of English Mystics,’* says ‘If mysticism is correctly the habit of mind which discerns the spiritual in common things, Browning may certainly be claimed as one of the band,’ and later, writing of the poet’s philosophy, he continues: ‘It is a mystical philosophy based on a sacramental view of experience.’

Assuredly it is Browning’s intense realization of that which underlies—of that which is within—which largely forms the vital interest of his poetry. Even when we do not respond to or comprehend him, there is still a mysterious pervading energy within the words which communicates itself through them to us. To look with him through the veils of life appeals strongly to that instinct to discover and penetrate into the unknown, which is indigenous in human kind and which is the unconscious expression of the Divinely implanted intuition, that we only partially and temporally belong to this world in which we have our being—that there is always something in front to which we must attain—somewhere in the beyond that we must find—Some One in the hiddenness whose voice calls us. We strain—we seek—we listen. We are not at rest because we are consciously not at home. Well did Saint Augustine understand this, when he wrote those memorable words:

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‘Thou, O! God, madest us for Thyself and our heart is restless, till it finds itself in Thee.’ . . . If, therefore, we desire to enter into the spirit of the majority of his poems and catch his inner meaning we must be prepared to realize that the outward is only the embodiment of the Spiritual and the Real.

Thus he writes:

*All partial beauty is a pledge of beauty  
In its plentitude.*

While to those who care only for the superficial and the commonplace, he adds:

*But since the pledge sufficed thy mood,  
Retain it! Plentitude be theirs, who looked above.*

Now the results of his researches into the mysteries ‘of the development of a soul,’ he gives us according to the bent of his genius, in a dramatic form, and a recent writer tells us<sup>1</sup> this was intentional because Browning believed that ‘man could best be reached by subterfuge; that truths might lodge through dramatic presentment which would otherwise be rejected.’ Thus the thoughts he presents to the mind are, so to speak, alive, and have their own momentum and their own sphere of action and influence. This, it may be said, is in greater or lesser degree true of all thought, because thought is essentially

<sup>1</sup>F. M. Sim. *Robert Browning*.

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creative, but it would seem to have been the Poet’s aim to prove this truth by bringing his students face to face with those interior and spiritual causes, buried deeply in the affections and emotions of the understanding and will, from which outward developments in word and deed automatically arise.

In doing this, the dramatic quality of his art provides that we see, not only the soul he studies, but something also of the external circumstances which furnish the stage on which that soul lives and acts.

The spirit of a man is no mere waif or stray which happens to be caught upon the wing and born somehow or other into a material tenement. There is nothing of the accidental in the entrance of this or that spirit into its earthly environment. The surroundings in which we can best play our part and learn the lessons of our probation, are those in which we stand, however mysterious in some cases they may appear to be. And although we have the power within certain unspecified limits of their modification or change, it is yet quite impossible that we should not be influenced by the state or rank, the wealth or poverty, the historical period or geographical position into which we are brought.

This Browning skilfully acknowledges in most of his poems; it may be in a prefatory note, such as, ‘Salzburg, a cell in the Hospital, 1541,’ or as in *Abt*

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*Vogler*, where he makes visible the old Musician sitting at the organ of his own invention and all that that suggests of character, status and education, thus giving to the imagination a definite lead and submitting it at once to a locality and certain fixed ideas. Sometimes he is more subtle, there may be no note, yet the background and furniture of the stage are nevertheless there and shown to us, in a few descriptive touches or in the mere rhythm of the words.<sup>1</sup>

It is partly due to this suggestive staging that Browning's poems are so intense and alive.

Hence it is, therefore, that the short note beneath the title *The Grammarian's Funeral*, has in it a real interest and importance. Thus it runs:—'Shortly after the Revival of Learning in Europe.'

First, he thus limits the time in the world's history when the Grammarian was supposed to live, for we deal in this instance with a fictitious, although typical character—with one whom his students extolled and likened to the highest peak of a great mountain range.

*All the peaks soar, but one the rest excels.*

Secondly, the mention of Europe further limits his date, for the Revival of Learning, which was part of

<sup>1</sup> This is exquisitely shown in *Evelyn Hope* and *Boot and Saddle and Cavalier Songs*.

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the great and mysterious upheaval of literary and artistic talent known as ‘The Renaissance,’ began in Europe about the fourteenth century. At this time, the mental torpor of the Middle Ages was broken up, as though by a volcanic power from within. Men began once more to think, to question, to investigate and to learn urged by an immense exhilaration of psychic force.

*Look out, if yonder be not day again  
Rimming the rock row.*

The pursuit of knowledge has ever been one of man’s chiefest delights, indeed we seem to have brought with us from the Other Side an insatiable desire to know. The accumulation of knowledge is as an hereditary banking account on which we perpetually draw and which forms our great means of experience and progress.

Now all progress is subject to variations of impetus. There are periods of time when we appear to make little or no advance; others when, for no apparent cause we rush forward by leaps and bounds. Times, that is, when the Divine Nurse has said:

*Sleep, crop and herd! sleep, darkling thorpe and croft.  
Safe from the weather!*

But now, he, the Grammarian, and these men who loved him were of those who would leave



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*... the common crofts, the vulgar thorpes  
Each in its tether*

and

*... the unlettered plain its herd and crop;  
Seek we ...*

*... a tall mountain, citied to the top  
Crowded with culture!*

*Thither our path lies; wind we up the heights:*

For him and them and many others, the bird of morn had given the signal. Man's mind had heard and awakened and once more it was true of him

*He's for the morning.*

The law of human progress seems very similar to that which governs the tides. Both have their irresistible advances and their equally irresistible withdrawals. Scientists now-a-days give the physical universe an existence of milliards of years and human life, though comparatively modern, many millions. During even the few thousands into which we can grope in the sands of Egypt, the mounds of Assyria, the wildernesses of Central America and the jungles of India, it is recognized that civilizations have grown, flourished and decayed. Beings like ourselves have in some cases left their marks in remnants of literature, poetry, art and engineering, and probably the same was true of the ages before them and that the rise and fall of progress in know-



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ledge has always been the law of the past. Indeed,  
there are those who look back even beyond the vast-  
ness of this Creation and who think that Time itself  
is only a single wave thrown forward from Eternity  
to return into Eternity again; merely a gathering of  
unthinkable force for another and yet another and  
again another mighty æonian charge towards the  
high tide of Infinity which is always attainable,  
though never to be attained.

The movement is eternally back and forth, but on  
the whole, to the praise and glory of the Creator,  
less back than forth.

*The worldling and the atheist  
... mistrust and say, ‘But time escapes:  
Live now or never!’  
He said, ‘What’s time? Leave Now for dogs and apes!  
Man has Forever.’  
Was it not great? did not he throw on God,  
(He loves the burthen)—  
God’s task to make the heavenly period  
Perfect the earthen?*

What does *now* matter? What is time set over against  
eternity? Is it not a sign of our smallness, that we  
think ourselves so great, so important, our works so  
wonderful, our griefs so deep, our struggles and our  
quarrels, ay, even our sorrows and our deaths, so  
urgent, so immense? Yet what are they when the

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countless ages of the past look at us through the gathered glooms of the eternal? What will they be when the centuries have rolled on forward into the unknown again? when we live in the time to come and scale other mountain tops?

The Middle Ages, which is the name given to the historical times between the far back and the modern was one of the recurring periods of mental quiescence and these are necessary for the health of the human mechanism, for progress in knowledge and also in physique rarely coincide. Nature knows better than to use all forms of vital energy at one and the same time. She gives the collective mind night times by the partial withdrawal of overmastering mental forces, while the other and physical side of man's nature strengthens and develops, and thus she strives to keep the balance true between the soul and the body.

During these long centuries, to live, to fight and to fulfil the outward requirements of Holy Church was as much as the nations could do, and when the people were not labouring or fighting, they were only too glad to leave thought and learning to the few and the religious and give themselves to any pleasures that came in their way. They found, 'the bosom of the plain' a quite sufficient interest. Spiritual life was at its ebb tide, as also was the mental, but God

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never leaves Himself without witness, and, though they knew it not, the greatest and best of the civilized world were waiting for ‘cock crow!’

In the era immediately preceding, great ambitions and national needs for expansion, led to terrible, decimating wars. The mighty and barbarous tribes of Germania were hungry and restless and at last poured southward like an irresistible flood upon the old western mother, and the fall of Rome was the end of the ancient history of Europe and the beginning of the Middle Ages of which Browning was so enamoured a student. To him, as a great scholar with a prodigious memory, that little line of introduction alluded to meant, no doubt, the whole of the Romance of History which ultimately awoke the nations from a low sensual life to a higher and a new life brought about by a stupendous movement of the great—and to man slowly—turning wheels of that government of God, in which Browning so steadfastly believed.

One hundred years after Old Rome went to her doom, Mahomet was born and became the Founder of the Arabian Empire. His successors loved learning and science and in the leisure of their prosperity came into possession of a number of ancient Greek Manuscripts which they studied and translated. Meantime the soldiers of the Empire pushed for-

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ward westward through North Africa into Spain and later into France where they were defeated by Charlemagne, who thus ultimately became possessor of the fine old Manuscripts and in A.D. 800, brought them safely to Rome, where, after their thousands of miles of wanderings they rested in the grand old city until, five or six centuries later, men woke up from their long mental lethargy, hungry to know, hungry with a great hunger to learn. They seized on the treasured Manuscripts with avidity, and strove to puzzle out their meaning, which, after the long lapse of time and two translations was none too easy.

Thus, by means of the political rise and fall of nations and of sanguinary wars, the literature of the Ancient world was saved for the illumination of the future, and evil once more made to subserve good.

So the poet Thompson writes:

*From seeming evil still educing good,  
And better thence again, and better still  
In infinite progression.*

In the opening lines of the poem, Browning delicately suggests this soul-stirring story. The low-lying villages asleep in the dimness of the waning night time are to him significant of those long, long years full of human dreams and vanity, yet as he intimates shepherded by that over-shadowing Love,

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which tethers and cares for them, before, with his usual exhilarating abruptness, he cries: ‘Look out,’ for indeed already the darkness is passing and the dawn of a new era with its golden glory is thinly edging the high and rocky scaur above the plain.

Then come those moving words, that there—there on the hilltops is where the morning brings the awakening to those who watch for it and desire to climb; for repression had done its work and now from within the censer of the collective mind, the light and heat of human intellect, like the resistless rising of the sun, strives to free itself and seek its Giver.

*Leave we the common crofts, the vulgar thorpes  
Each in its tether  
Sleeping safe on the bosom of the plain,  
Cared-for till cock-crow:  
Look out if yonder be not day again  
Rimming the rock-row!  
That’s the appropriate country; there, man’s thought,  
Rarer, intenser,  
Self-gathered for an outbreak, as it ought,  
Chafes in the censer.*

But the strange and beautiful Romance of the Revival of Learning in Italy was not yet fully complete. Ancient Greek was already a dead language, therefore teachers were urgently needed who were students of its beauties and conversant with its precise

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modes of thought and expression. This pressing necessity was supplied in a manner to which recent events add some interest.

While the Saracens and Charlemagne in the west were unconsciously bringing about the Great Achievement which in the centuries to come was to produce in Europe and England some of the greatest authors and artists the world has ever known, another people was silently advancing from the Far East.

The story runs that, in 1290, a small but warlike tribe of Tartar or Mongolian origin, came trekking westward along the Great Steppes of Central Asia. One day in their wandering they came upon two armies in fierce fight. Seeing that one was losing ground, the adventurers rushed in, turned the tide of battle and won the day. Their reward was a grant of land in the north of Asia Minor and so the modern race of Turks became established in Bithynia, just across the Bosphorus from the city of Constantinople which was still the nominal seat of the Eastern Roman Empire. It was a tempting view and after looking and longing for nearly two centuries, desire took them across the Straits, the Emperor Constantine Palaeologus was conquered, the Eastern Empire fell and the Turks became a European Power.

The population of the city, who were mainly Greeks, fled precipitately and a large number of the

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most learned proceeded to Italy, where they became lecturers and exponents of that ancient literature awaiting them there. Thus in 1453, about 2,000 years after it was written, the grand object of its primary creation was fulfilled, to bring about the Revival of Learning in Europe.

Surely this is an astounding illustration of those mills of God, which, though they grind so slowly yet ‘grind exceeding small.’

To recognize all this as no doubt Browning did, being a profound lover and student of these times, is useful in order to fully understand the mental atmosphere breathed by the scholars of that day. Born into the new excitement, caught by it as by a whirlwind, every word, ay, every thought became for the student a matter of the deepest interest and importance. It was a time of eager passionate desire for knowledge, such as with our present day advantages we can scarcely comprehend. To gain it no exertion was too much, no renunciation too great. Pleasure, time, health were ruthlessly sacrificed. Thus it was of vital moment to the Grammarian and others like him, what the Greek words exactly meant and how for certain they had been used and ought to be used then and always, for if the foundations are not sure how can the city be safe? Therefore in physical exhaustion and pain, with Death’s hand closing down



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upon him, he laboured, not to retain life, but to settle 'Hoti's business' and convince his disciples how 'Oun' and 'the enclitic *De*' must be considered, before he passed into the new state, that was for him, not death, in any sense, but the pledge of a fulfilment—for knowledge—knowledge was for him the Gate of Heaven and was not he one of those chosen to force it open and to let in the world? Was not this his duty as well as his pleasure? Men were in earnest in those days.

Small matters these to trouble about, it may be said, when the momentous change was in process there and then within him. Should he not have been questioning his fitness for it—preparing for the passage into the new and the unknown?

*Here's the town-gate reached: . . .*

*Gaping before us.*

Now let us try to gather up the fragments of his life and character.

Of his birth, parentage or boyhood we hear nothing, but in early manhood, it appears, he too had had his period of mental inertia, when

*Long he lived nameless*

when, like other young and handsome men of the day, he 'enjoyed life,' and thought nothing of its aim or end—of whence he came, or whither he should go!



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*... how should spring take note*

*Winter would follow?*

*Till lo, the little touch, and youth was gone!*

What then? How did he meet that touch? Illness, pain, age, death—they were all advancing towards him. Did he shrink? Did he moan?

*New measures, other feet anon!*

*My dance is finished?*

Not he! Did the Lyric Apollo’s face and throat mean only the love of the sensual, only the pleasures of Now?

*No, that’s the world’s way*

This man had latent in his soul the principles of strength and beauty of which the Godlike face and throat were but the external symbols. Not for one moment did he falter. It was he would

*Keep the mountain-side, Make for the city!*

*He knew the signal, and stepped on with pride*

*Over men’s pity;*

It meant for him the arousing—the *réveillée* of all his sleeping powers. For him, too, there was a Renaissance! a new life! so he

*Left play for work, and grappled with the world*

*Bent on escaping:*

*What’s in the scroll, quoth he, thou keepest furled?*

*Show me their shaping,*

*Theirs who most studied man, the bard and sage,—*

*Give!*

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And Euripides and Socrates and Plato and the great Poets and Thinkers of the Old World opened their minds and hearts to him and gave him of themselves, and his followers might well say.

*Learned, we found him.*

What mattered it to him, if his head was bald and his eyes were like lead? His way beset by infirmity and disease? True,—

*The way winds narrowly*

but

*Not a whit troubled*

*Back to his studies, fresher than at first*

*He . . . with a sacred thirst*

*Sucked at the flagon.*

Thus Browning draws for us a character, typical of the age in the intensity of love for the new learning, but, be it observed, typical also of the poet's own ideal of what a man might be in the fulness of his mind's development. Many of the thoughts with which he invests the Grammarian are no doubt anachronisms, for the religious opinions of that day were crude and cramped except in very rare instances and quite unlike those of these modern times. But the man he shows us is one of real manliness. Strong of purpose, great in intellectual power, courageous, persevering, capable of continuous self-sacrifice, a

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man of high ideal, yet of humble mind and of such earnestness and balance that he could and did attend to details, a man, who with faith in a great future of usefulness, lived for it in the present, unmurmuringly, insistently, for like the poet himself,

*He at least believed in Soul  
Was very sure of God.*

He thought not of the attained, but of the attainable—

*Grant I have mastered learning’s crabbed text,  
Still there’s the comment.*

Those who loved him said

*Now Master, take a little rest!*

The sceptical had long ago urged ‘Time to taste life,  
Live now or never’ but

*This man said rather Actual life comes next?*

Ah! yes, so it does, but first there’s the preparing for it.

*Oh such a life as he resolved to live,  
When he had learned it,  
When he had gathered all books had to give!  
Sooner, he spurned it.*

In it, he would drink of the wine of overflowing knowledge that he thirsted for—but now—now was his chance to learn the sacred Alphabet! Now he

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would learn to look, even with those leaden eyes of his, right through into the heart of truth and strive to divine its secrets.

*Let me know all! Prate not of most or least,  
Painful or easy!*

*Even to the crumbs I'd fain eat up the feast . . .*

Therefore he must idealize the fabric 'quite' and 'execute the parts' for, after all, it is the details that build up the edifice, the steady continuance of duty done for love's sake, that makes the Ideal into the Reality.

For according to the Ideal do we raise the super-structure of life. A man of low ideal is so, not because he 'sees and does a little thing' with earnestness, nor even because he goes on 'adding one to one' in the inevitable drudgery of the Common Round, but because he lets his heart satisfy itself and rest in the success of the little thing, and congratulates himself in the accumulation of his one hundred, as the limit of his desires and effort.

The Idealist may and probably has to do and add in like manner, but his aim being beyond his immediate reach, he hopes for its attainment in the future of a higher and more spiritual stage of life. For his ideal is not a fixed and visible end, but one which ever rises with his own advance towards it. In the present there is for him certain disappointment and

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even failure, but this does not count. Such temporary loss is the price of a truer gain, such failure is the stimulating goad to a larger output of his strength and faith.

So Browning, in another poem, says:

*But what if I fail of my purpose here!  
It is but to keep the nerves at strain  
To dry one’s eyes and laugh at a fall  
And baffled—get up and begin again!  
For mankind—springs  
Salvation, by each hindrance interposed  
They climb!*

The death of the Selfhood, is the life of the Divine. Therefore it was that while life held feebly out, he must merge himself at all costs, in the future of those younger men and make sure that they were sound as to his teaching, even with regard to those small but elusive Greek words. Small were they? How do we know that anything is small?

*Say not a small event! Why small?  
Costs it more pain that this ye call  
A ‘great event’ should come to pass  
Than that?*

*Small, Great, are merely terms we bandy here  
Since to the Spirit’s absoluteness, all  
Are alike.*

‘No poet before Browning,’ says Dean Inge, ‘ever

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realized so fully, the profound significance of the apparently trivial.' All knowledge, the poet teaches, even in the least details points to usefulness, and while here on earth we have our opportunity to earn the means for that particular and individual service for which the Creator designs us, being confident that:

... *God surely will contrive  
Use for our earning.*

There is no waste in any part of the Divine Kingdom, and the fact that in the Schoolroom of this world the precise object of all our learning in all its various phases and degrees is not easy to recognize, does not really matter, for, beyond the text books,

*Still there's the comment.*

'Let me know all' says the Grammarian in his intense earnestness, and when the explanation is given in the clearer atmosphere of a higher Classroom, it will be found to embrace all of value that has been learned and will adjust and correct all confused ideas of the relatively important and the trivial.

In an article in the *Morning Post* (January 17th 1913) on 'Boy Poets of the Perse School, Cambridge,' the writer, although an Oxonian, asserts that Cambridge has given birth to more poets than Oxford and he gives as the chief reason that Cam-

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bridge ‘unquestionably pays more attention to the minute points of style, carefully ascertaining the precise weight and colouring of the smallest word of Greek or Latin and thereby attaining a wonderful accuracy in the use thereof in original composition. No possible shade of meaning or delicate inflexion is allowed to pass unnoticed.’ Again, ‘Cambridge still looks to Shrewsbury for scholars who achieve the art of thinking in Greek, because they have been taught that infinite pains should be taken about infinitesimal points of interpretation.’ To these, ‘the truth of the rendering comes before an elegant effect.’ The working motto of such might be, ‘Take care of the Truth and the Beauty will take care of itself.’

It seemed interesting to note this quite modern dictum, in view of the almost desperate anxiety of Browning’s typical scholar of the Middle Ages about the doctrine of *Hôti*, *Oun* and ‘the enclitic *De*.’ Meanwhile, it is characteristic of Browning that he makes the process of learning, the central point of enthusiasm. For him the fascination of knowledge is the exhilaration of its attainment. So far as it is mere erudition, it is alive only so far as we put our own life into it. In its Spiritual form of Truth, it is living,—for it partakes of the Infinity of God and is the stairway of the Soul, by which in endless progres-

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sion, it mounts higher and higher to gain the Prize Itself—the Victory of Life.

All these thoughts and many others Robert Browning tells over and over again in his poems under a hundred disguises. The story of the Grammarian is the Story of *Abt Vogler*. Both seek with eager hearts Eternal Life but with this difference: In the latter, the soul sees the Vision of the completed Ideal, 'in those rampired walls as transparent as glass' and hears 'The Whisper of God' which assures it that

*All we have willed or hoped or dreamed of good shall exist:*

*Not its semblance, but itself: . . .*

and finally leads the old man back to the Common Chord of the everyday, there to live in the memory and hope of the Palace of Life.

In the story of the Grammarian, he shows the soul living in the 'Common Round,' working amongst the foundations of its belief, 'basing its Palace well,' basing it on the Revelation to it of those deep intuitive conceptions of the Divine, which are our heritage as spirits, 'the trailing clouds of glory' we bring with us and which sometimes make the Soul say, in awe and wonderment at its own conviction: 'I know.'



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Says our poet:-

*God has conceded two sights to a man  
One, of man’s whole work, Time’s completed plan;  
The other of the minute’s work, man’s first  
Step to the plan’s completeness.*

For the Grammarian there was the ‘Whisper’ though not the Vision, but he had faith in a ‘use for our earning,’ in a goal for all effort and disdained to filch a few pence of earthly pleasure or self-indulgence from the wealth of his inheritance, to ‘discount life as fools do here’ but ‘threw himself on God,’ and

*... ventured neck or nothing—heaven’s success  
Won, or earth’s failure.*

And in the end, when the veiled angel asked the momentous question

*Wilt thou trust death or not?*

unhesitatingly answered ‘Yes’ and put his hand with childlike confidence into that other, trusting himself to that conception of the Father, Who he was sure would

*... make the Heavenly period  
Perfect the earthen.*

And the perfecting, the attainment, the end of all knowing is Love.

*Knowledge means  
Ever renewed assurance by defeat  
That Victory is somehow yet to reach.  
But Love is Victory! The Prize Itself!*

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*In Love success is sure  
Attainment—no delusion.*

Yes. Love is the Completion. The Ultimate end and aim, and Truth the ladder set betwixt Heaven and earth by means of which Love both Divine and human passes and repasses; by which God, who is Love

*Creates the Love to reward the Love:  
And claims us still for His own Love's sake!*

Love cannot be self-centred. It must manifest and seek manifestation in return. Hence the necessity of Creation and of beings with free will who can be loved, and to whom can be given the Revelation of love and the best and most joyous of all gifts, the power to reciprocate love.

*Enough to say, I feel  
Love's sure effect and being loved, must love  
The love—its cause behind. I can and do.*

And Service, voluntary, intelligent and impassioned is the outcome and expression of Loving.

*All knowledge points to usefulness.*

So this man, whose career the poet has depicted, died in harness and those who knew and loved him said, with just and tender pride:

*This is our Master, famous, calm and dead  
Borne on our shoulders.*

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In this funeral oration there is no word of mourning nor even of regret. It is rather a paeon of satisfaction for a life honourably lived, in honest and humble preparation for a continuous advance in knowledge and a more competent Service later on. For Robert Browning, the man of large hope and steadfast faith in Omnipotent Love, Death is not a giving out of life, but a translation into it.

*Earth fades—Heaven breaks on me  
I shall stand next  
Before the Throne of God.*

It is that marvellous attitude of the soul which knowing no other but the Father, instinctively

*... throws himself on God, and unperplexed  
Seeking shall find him.*

For the multitude who do not care to climb there still remains the ‘bosom of the plain’ on which to sleep and dream, or at best, the foothills, where like flocks and herds they graze with down-bent eyes; but for men of Heavenly ambition, who scale the heights with hearts and gaze set upwards, there is the mountain top!

*Well ... here’s the proper place  
Here’s the top peak ...*

And here the devoted scholars leave the worn-out casing of the man they praised: ‘Loftily lying.’

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*For the journey is done and the summit attained  
And the barriers fall.*

and we see them bareheaded, with faces turned towards the glowing east, chanting in the sweet fresh promise of the growing morn:

*Hail to the purlieus,  
All ye highfliers of the feathered race  
Swallows and curlews!*

How suggestive is this sudden chorus of triumph and glad song! The unfledged birdling of earth's narrow nest has found its wings. Why grieve? Why weep? Browning tells us something of his ideas of the physical change we call death. 'Never say of me that I am dead,' he said. He saw through to the other side of the dark veil which cloaks our eyes and lo! he found it was a birth and a beginning and not an end! Sorrow in parting there must be, but we know his words:—

*O thou soul of my soul! I shall clasp thee again  
And with God be the rest!*

That is the golden side of separation! The rapture of an eternal reunion! To him, the very fact that men can look beyond the earthly and conceive of the Heavenly is a sure pledge of the soul's immortality.

This man, the Grammarian, believed in God and trusted Him and if we feel that he had but a shadow of the full Truth, he had at least the earnest love of

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it and was not afraid to look to its eternal Source  
in hope!

So in the poet’s vision, this man, with intellect unshackled was permitted to enter into that tremendous world of causes, best described as themselves manifestations of superior and supreme forces.

*Lofty designs must end in like effects.*

There, where the mystical meteors of Thought and the lightning of inspiration flash and flame—where the storm which sunders spirit from its prison house brings joy, and where peace, as dew, cometh in the morning, there they bade him ‘God be with thee’ and so left him

*. . . still loftier than the world suspects  
Living and dying!*



# THE LOVER





# THE LOVER

THROUGHOUT the whole of Browning's works, Love in relation to Death is a favourite theme and one prolific of many deep and arresting thoughts. Like intertwined threads of gold, it appears and reappears persistently in a large number of poems, which plainly indicate that in the great Poet's thought Love is the very essence of the soul's true life and Death, not an ending but that which the old Egyptian mystics called, a Completion—beginning, and in its highest form certainly, a means of carrying on an otherwise restricted life, into one of new and fuller knowledge and scope.

*We die, which means to say, the whole's removed  
Dismounted wheel by wheel, this complex gin,—  
To be set up anew elsewhere—begin  
A task indeed but with a clearer clime  
Than the murk lodgement of our building time.*

‘What, it may be asked, is definitely meant by these two terms, Love and Death? If we think back into the beginning of things, it will soon be found that Love is the motive power of all creation.

*He, God, Who in all His work below  
Adapted to the needs of man  
Made Love the basis of the plan.*

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For Love is Life and the Life-giving Principle. Even the little which we as human beings know of love, teaches us that it is of the Divine Nature, and must go forth and give itself. The very annihilation of love is self-containment, i.e. an introverted affection. And the giving of love must ever presuppose that which can be loved and that which can receive and respond. Thus, believing in a God who is love, from the human point of view, it was of necessity for love to take form and limit itself and manifest. Divine Form is Intelligence or Wisdom and thence, in due procession, Creation came into being, as the visible, tangible Thought or Word of God, expressed through matter in a phenomenal World of things. Love is, as it were, the Respiration of the Divine Life, and respiration has two movements; it is expiratory and inspiratory. If it desires to give itself, it also desires to draw into itself and thus receive! Under another metaphor, Browning in *Rabbi Ben Ezra* tells us this same fact: The Potter forms the Cup of man's character—Out of the Passive clay—upon the wheel of life he fixes it

... *mid this dance*

*Of plastic circumstance*

to be formed, tested, ornamented according to His Thought's desire and this, not only that in the great Day of the Feast it should be a fit receptacle of 'The

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new wine’s foaming flow’, not only because the soul needs the fulfilling of God, but, because—O wonder of wonders! the All Life, the All Wisdom, the All Power, needs man’s wine of love! So exults the poet:

*... not even when the whirl was worst  
Did I,—to the wheel of life  
With shapes and colours rife  
Bound dizzily,—mistake my end, to slake Thy thirst.*

Our end! The object of our existence! that we may slake His thirst for Love!

Yet it is not a mechanical, self-serving love He thirsts for, but one, glad, voluntary, intelligent, ardent with life caught from His own life and with one sole aim, to coalesce with Him as like with like.

So, says Browning in, *A Death in the Desert*: Our life here

*... with all it yields of joy and woe,  
And hope and fear,  
Is just our chance o’ the prize of learning love,  
How love might be, hath been indeed, and is;*

And in the wonderful summing up of this same poem of Love and Death, the only simile which can express the teaching of the Apostle of Love is that of the absolute oneness of the Perfect Marriage:

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*That He will grow incorporate with all,*

*...*

*Groom for each bride!*

for

*... Christ saith, this He lived and died to do.*

And all real love as we see and know it, is but an offset or reflex of this, its Source!

And what of Death?

The first thought regarding Death is of some irresistible Power which from outside, deprives us of all we hold most to be prized and which breaks at its own will, the continuity of physical life. So far as externals are concerned this is true enough, but only of externals, because man, as a spiritual Being, lives, not only in the phenomenal world of circumstance and thought, but also, subconsciously in the spiritual world, to which, in truth, he belongs; and the two planes of life in him are co-existent—though not co-terminous. Both planes are to us more or less actual, although in fact, one is merely apparent and only one real.

Through the false thinking of the ages, we have placed ourselves in such a position, with regard to reality and the world of causes, that we perceive it only as a reflection in a glass darkly.

Now the spirit life in Man is twofold and each has its own form of death according to the ascent or des-

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cent of each individual soul. Every rational being, by reason of the gift of rationality can make a choice and must sooner or later decide the momentous issue, whether it will live for itself and die, by cutting itself off from the only source of Life, or voluntarily accept the authority of a higher Will and for love of that Will, sacrifice its self-life, even to the death. The one is a dying which continually transmutes itself into Life; the other, a living which continually transmutes itself into the loss of life!

The first of these mystical deaths is the only one of true moment to a follower of the Christ.

We arrive therefore at a perception of three forms of death, that of the Body which to us, has gradually assumed an overwhelming and possibly exaggerated importance, but which one cannot help sometimes thinking is, to God, of comparatively small moment. That of the Selfhood—that lawless physical and psychical side of us which must either mystically die to ensure the true spiritual life or be permitted to bring about the death of the Soul, which is the only death to be really shunned and feared. Browning in his poems sets before us instances of each.

In *The Ring and the Book*, the basis of the story is death caused to the body. Pompilia, the Contarini and Guido alike die violent deaths, but Pompilia and Caponsacchi each die a mystical death.

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Pompilia, in the innocence of fifteen, of an inborn sweet and serene nature, unconsciously as it seems, lays down her self-life, with all its girlish desires for love and joy and submits without reproach or repining to the unhappy circumstances of the earthly life assigned to her.

‘Well, God you see, God plants us where we grow’ and when at last in obedience to the higher instinct of motherhood, she asserts herself, she is in fact, sacrificing to Love, all that by nature and training must have been hardest and most difficult to yield and from which at first she must have shrunk with utmost fear.

Who can say how great suffering prepared the way before the shrinking gentle girl faced the ordeal of acting on her own initiative, and took more than her own life into her own hands.

*My sole thought, being still as night came, Done  
another day!*

*How good to sleep and so get nearer death.*

Caponsacchi also lays down his self-life, the strong desire or sense nature, but he does so consciously—as a grown man of large worldly experience, who knows what he does, what he risks, what the consequences may be and indeed must be—and in doing this for Love’s sake, he gains the Higher Life and becomes the Soldier Saint!

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*Powerless all that night  
I paced the city. It was the first spring.  
By the invasion I lay passive too,  
In rushed new things, the old were rapt away  
Alike abolished—the inside weight of the world  
That pulled me down. Death meant to spurn the ground,  
Soar to the sky,—Die well and you do that.  
The very immolation made the bliss;  
Death was the heart of life.*

*Into another state, under new rule  
I knew myself, was passing swift and sure;  
Now when I found out first that life and death  
Are means to an end, that passion uses both,  
Indisputably mistress of the man  
Whose form of worship is Self-sacrifice:*

And what of Guido? In the poem *The Pope* there is given a masterly summary of his life and character. Love of self, accentuated by love of money drew him steadily down hill, until the death of the body is swallowed up at last in the appalling terror of a lost Soul.

Browning as a mystical thinker seldom lets us lose sight of that intangible mysterious inner vision which is the property of the Seer. If it is not always possible to follow him in the inwardness of his thought, neither is it altogether possible to escape the consciousness of its invisible Presence. It is this secret Presence which in some of these poems of Love and

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Death it is desired to make more apparent, for it is in this quality of his genius that Browning has most power over his students and lovers.

When only twenty-three he wrote the poem of *Paracelsus*. In it he brings before us a well known man of mighty intellect, and of an exceedingly forceful character. He put force even upon himself to acquire knowledge—his supreme ideal.

*Who will may know  
The secret'st workings of my soul. What fairer seal  
Shall I require to my authentic mission  
Than this fierce energy? this instinct striving  
Because its nature is to strive?  
How know I else such glorious fate my own  
But in the restless irresistible force  
That works within me?*

By force he strove to bring his contemporaries into line with himself and his discoveries. He had gained knowledge, but, as he said later:—

*Love, hope, fear, faith—these make humanity;  
These are its sign and note and character;  
And these, I have lost! gone, shut from me forever.*

So the men of his day refused his science, resenting his aggressive authority and scarcely veiled contempt and he, utterly devoid of patience and humility, saw in them only 'a monopoly of fools'.



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Therefore he discarded them and in his subsequent disappointment turned away to unworthy earthly substitutes, called pleasures. At last, in 1541, physical failure followed upon the moral, as it ever must and Paracelsus lay upon his deathbed, a human wreck. But Death is kind and sweet, the shrouded hand and face are those of Love and He has summoned the lonely and bereaved Festus to come to that dreary cell,—Festus, the faithful friend, the kindly, humble-minded man, who loves him and believes in him and who is to be the messenger of help and consolation, knowing sorrow through his own heart’s grief.

He comes and prays his love may find a way into that poor ‘glorious spirit’ struggling with ill dreams.

*God! Thou art love! I build my faith on that.  
Even as I watch beside thy tortured child  
Unconscious whose hot tears fall fast by him,  
So doth thy right Hand guide us through the world  
Wherein we stumble. God! What shall we say?  
How has he sinned?  
Save him, dear God; it will be like Thee; bathe him  
In light and life . . . but thou  
Forgivest . . . Thou madest him and knowest  
How he was fashioned.  
Ah! He awakens! Aureole, I am here! 'Tis Festus!  
Festus, your Festus!*

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And Paracelsus answers,

*Dear Festus!*

*Speak on, or I dream again. Speak on!  
Some story, anything—only your voice . . .*

Then Festus utters the lovely lyric

*Thus the Mayne glideth  
Where my love abideth . . .*

and presently murmured sounds issue from the pallid lips,

*My heart! they loose my heart, those simple words;  
Its darkness passes, which nought else could touch: . . .  
You, indeed!*

*Are you alone here?*

Thus Paracelsus regains full consciousness and the two friends commune together, while Death stands back and waits, until the moment comes to draw aside the veil that hides eternal mysteries and the dying eyes of the poor, great man, recognize the secret of his probation.

*And this is death: I understand it all.  
New being waits me; new perceptions must  
Be born in me before I plunge therein;  
Which last is Death's affair; and while I speak  
Minute by minute he is filling me  
With power; and while my foot is on the threshold  
Of boundless life . . .  
I turn new knowledge upon old events.*

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Then the great brain reasserts itself, though never for a moment is the silent waiting Presence forgotten and the filling with the Power becomes increasingly apparent. Paracelsus looks back, realizes the advantages of his birth. He was born

*not to idly gaze, but cast  
Light on a darkling race; . . .*

and there had been a ‘happy time’ when, as he said, ‘I vowed myself to man’. He had brought his gift to his fellows and it had been refused, rejected—and deep dejection followed because he had not understood, that man can only ‘painfully attain to joy’ and be kept a man, by ‘hope and fear and love’. ‘All this was hid from me’, he said, so dreams grew dim, great aims became narrowed and he fell! He had tried to give Power through Power.

*I gazed on Power, till I grew blind.*

He had striven to do God’s will to make men wise by Force, but now his eyes were opening and a deep new humility was growing in his soul.

*I learned my own deep error; love’s undoing  
Taught me the worth of love in man’s estate,  
And what proportion love should hold with power  
    . . . love preceding  
Power, and with much power, always much more love;  
I learned this and supposed the whole was learned: . . .*

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*And why?*

*In my own heart love had not been made wise  
To trace love's first beginnings in mankind  
To know even hate is but a mask of love's,  
To see a good in evil, and a hope  
In ill-success; to sympathize, be proud  
Of their half reasons, faint aspirings, dim  
Struggles for truth . . .  
All this I knew not, and I failed.*

Then Azrael pressed closer and there entered into him more power, more faith, more love, and the Resurrection light shone out upon him and he utters his last great hope:

*If I stoop  
Into a dark tremendous sea of cloud,  
It is but for a time; I press God's lamp  
Close to my breast; its splendour, soon or late,  
Will pierce the gloom: I shall emerge one day. . .*

And like a far-off echo Festus whispers:

*And this was Paracelsus!*

So ends this beautiful and illuminating story of a great friendship between two men and of the regenerative power of that love which was based in the humility of selflessness.

It would be impossible to make even the scantiest survey of all the poems in which Browning expatiates on this subject. It is warp and woof of so much

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of his weaving! Sometimes it is in the life-story of women, sometimes of men, for sooner or later, in human love, between friend and friend, sweethearts or married folk, the brighter lines of joy are always more or less toned down by the darker ones of suffering and death. Well is love called a passion. More than often it involves the mysterious Passion week of a Soul. But it must never be forgotten, that although death may intervene, Love can never truly die, being the Life itself.

It is an axiom of science that life can only be begotten of life and if for life we read love—it will be found just as fundamentally true. So the large-hearted man whose works we study, never despised any love, however cramped or mean, or even low in morality, according to this world’s ‘coarse thumb and finger,’ *if* only it goes out in genuine feeling towards some other and *if*, though only for a moment, the self is truly lost sight of. That moment is for him, the Divine potentiality of redemption, that, from which can spring a living soul, although its birth be only in an unclean stable full of ill-regulated natural affections, belonging to the crowded Inn of a man or woman’s heart.

The next poem for our thought is very different. In this quaint topsy-turvy world of ours there are many people who, like the round thing in a square

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hole, do not seem to fit into the surroundings in which they are placed. They are generally affectionate people and being capable of giving much, desire much in return.

In various ways this is one of the commonest of experiences, especially amongst those on the younger side of middle age. It is always distressful and a fruitful source of restlessness, discontent and questionings galore. The inner loneliness of life has not yet been understood and accepted, and the soul is still unwilling to admit the truth that

*Each in his sphere of joy and woe  
Our hermit spirits dwell and range apart.*

and it is also still astonished by the deepening conviction of the limits of its own narrow, and not always well governed little kingdom.

In *A Woman's Last Words*, we read between the lines of a wife, a large-hearted loveable woman, with probably some special talent, though none is specified, who, before her marriage had, no doubt, over-idealized her husband and found out afterwards that, when the glamour of her personality faded in the light of everyday life, unassisted by the electrical atmosphere of courtship, there was or seemed to be a decided lack of the previous sympathy and admiration on his part. In fact, she no longer felt that she and her attainments and interests were the pivot of

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his world. It had become evident that she was gradually drifting into a backwater of existence, while feeling able to be in the full driving energy of their united stream. In such circumstances some natural doubts might assail her of the depth and fibre of her husband's love, as he no longer appeared to understand and appreciate her at her true value. Questionings too might be insistent as to why she should be so placed, that her natural advantages should have so little, so very little encouragement or outlet and her talents be so unobserved and futile. Probably there was also some feeling of superiority and her life seemed likely to be spoiled and wasted. In fine, the woman in this silhouetted story, was very much engaged with her own self and it never occurred to her that the man's indifference, probably quite unwitting and the result of an assured affection and sense of possession, was

*Machinery just meant*

*To give the soul its bent.*

In such a case, as time passes, much bitterness of feeling is generated, finally a remonstrance, some bickering or worse ensues. Then truths, home-made, are told on each side, for there is another side though so far the wife has completely ignored it.

At last a choice must be made and she must make it. Shall they each go separate ways, like the lovers



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in Jean Inglelow's poem, who at first touched hands across the brook of life to be gradually divided by an impassable flood of waters in which love was lost?

In the monologue of these 'Last Words' Browning shows there is another way. Through all her deep dissatisfaction the wife's love has remained intact—that is certain—and this fact says much for her husband. Now she has thought it all out, since the latest fiery quarrel, has faced it bravely and frankly, and love—not of herself, but of the other has triumphed. She has seen his point of view and realizes that a sacrifice either of his or her feelings must be made. She decides this sacrifice shall be hers! Perhaps she really had the stronger nature so could best bear the brunt, or the larger heart, so could give up most—we do not know—but in this very sad and tender little poem Browning lets us feel the heartbreak and the sorrow of the dying, for a real dying it assuredly is. True, it is only in its earliest beginning and her eyes are full of tears, her sweet lips all a-tremble and there is sob after sob all along the lines for her heart is still full of her own renunciation. But she is quite determined! There shall be no more disputing or strain. Does not he too need sympathy that she can give? Is not his love, after all, her Garden of Eden? Yes, she will sacrifice her self—put it away—let it die! He shall love her



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in his own way and she will return his love and in his content learn to be satisfied. All sense of her superiority has vanished. He shall teach and all her self shall be given up to him. Only—she asks for a little more time, that her sorrow may not be too apparent but be buried quietly out of sight, after that good cry that always helps a woman so mysteriously. How pathetic it all is and how did Browning know so much about a woman’s ways?

The monologue sounds as if spoken to the husband himself, but doubtless it was uttered only on that secret stage, curtained carefully off from all eyes but the All-Father’s, where so many tragedies take place and whence so many wonderful and thrilling words pass into the silence.

As regards physical death, Robert Browning had very strong views. He hated the usual melancholy view of it and even the word itself was abhorrent to him. In his wife’s Testament after her death he wrote a quotation from Dante. ‘Thus I believe, thus I affirm, thus I am certain it is, that from this life I shall pass to another better, there, where that lady lives, of whom my soul is enamoured.’

There we have his solemn belief that death is but a passage to a state of true living, where, liberated from the imprisonment of the body, the spirit will be free to reach forth towards its highest.

## THE LOVER

*Body shall cumber  
Soul-flight no more,  
Waft of soul's wing!  
What lies above?  
Sunshine and Love  
Skyblue and Spring.*

This wonderful vitality of mind and body, alike made the ordinary ideas of the Great Transition distasteful to him, and in the last poem of his published works he writes from 'The Here' of the Spirit World after his supposed passing into it, and addresses those whom he has left behind in the old world, upon which he imagines himself to be looking down. He asks, 'Do those who love him and whom he loves really think of him as imprisoned in the grave? Do they pity *him*, who has escaped from the thralldom of the body, from the limitations of the earthly? Do they conceive of him as having any part or lot with the "aimless, helpless, hopeless," of the earth plane? "Being—who?"'

What of him now in his spirit's freedom? of that great heart and brain unfettered? free to think its best! to give of its best, free to scale the eternal heights of knowledge—strong to overcome all difficulties, delighting in every fresh influx of Divine strength, and able to love as even he had never loved before,—God's Freedman. We think of Browning

## ‘POEMS OF LOVE AND DEATH’

as we know him with profound affection and admiration, and the truth of the words by which he describes himself are written all over his Book of Life, both inside and out. He believed in a God of absolute Love and was not afraid. In his earth life he had ever greeted ‘The Unseen with a cheer,’ for to him the unseen was still Love, hidden for the moment as Francis Thompson says, ‘by the shadow of God’s Hand held out caressingly.’ Should he, a ‘Great Arm fellow of God,’ fear the seeing Him in the sunrise, with whom he had walked in the cool grey-nesses of the Eventide? Would not the Evening and the Morning bring in a New Day? Can we imagine, then, that he who loved and worked so vigorously while here, could ever acquiesce in an eternity of idleness or in pleasant aimless strolling in the Heavenly Pastures by the shores of the Golden Sea? No effort, no surmounting, no progress for evermore? Impossible! His message ever was, Let the soul while here brace and arm itself by Faith, Hope and Love, for the real life of true effort and of ever renewed creative progress and achievement.

*I breathe, I move. I truly am at last!  
For a veil is rent between  
Me and the truth, which passed  
Fitful—half guessed, half seen,—  
Grasped at—not gained, beld fast.*

## THE LOVER

‘Wilt thou trust Death or not?’ and he answered,  
‘Yes, Hence with life’s pale lure.’

In the wonderful poem of *Prospice*, we hear the glorious expression of this trust.

He had knelt by his wife’s deathbed, and she had sighed her last breath in his arms, and he did not, could not despise, this man of high faith and courage, the dissolution of the physical body which dismays most of us, except at times of great excitement or exaltation.

In *Prospice* he acknowledges the gloom, the rending, the wrenching apart—the black minute of the soul’s extreme test! He realizes it for us, faces it, so to speak, for those who shrink, because he has comfort to give.

‘Prospice,’ he cries, ‘Look forward.’ It is only a passing terror, a moment’s darkness. ‘Look forward’ into the Beyond—into the Afterwards of Victory and Freedom. For himself he is fearless before

*the Arch Fear in a visible form.*

*I was ever a fighter—so one fight more,*

*The best and the last!*

*I would hate that death bandaged my eyes and forbore*

*And bade me creep past.*

*No! let me taste the whole of it, fare like my peers*

*The heroes of old,*

*Bear the brunt, in a minute pay glad life’s arrears*

*Of pain, darkness and cold.*

## ‘POEMS OF LOVE AND DEATH’

*For sudden the worst turns the best to the brave  
The black minute's at end,  
And the elements' rage, the fiend-voices that rave,  
Shall dwindle, shall blend,  
Shall change, shall become first a peace out of pain,  
Then a light, then thy breast,  
O thou soul of my soul! I shall clasp thee again,  
And with God be the rest!*

Here surely is the reaching forth into the Infinite of a strong man's faith. But there are thousands in whose heart such faith finds no echo. How do these think of the dreaded Death Angel when he hurls down the central prop of some fragile life-tent? When he beckons with outstretched hand the young, the beautiful, and the flood gates open and engulf the hope of the future with all possibilities unfulfilled—all that might have been, lost seemingly for ever? Why this death? This denial of hope? What does such frustration of hope mean? In the long past what myriads of hearts have asked this question, what multitudes are asking it to-day. Why this apparent waste of life, why?

Robert Browning was alive to this testing of souls and in one of his loveliest poems and his deepest, he seems to, at least give a clue to this mystery! He tells us of an elderly man who loved a girl of sixteen who unexpectedly died. We know nothing of his

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past or what it held of work, disappointment or sorrow, but now at last in her he had found his other self. He was sure of it, sure that she and he in spite of the difference in age were intended to be one perfect Creature.

It was not, however, 'hertime to love' and perhaps, he says, 'she scarcely knew my name', so he held his peace and loved, waited and hoped.

She was his geranium spray of 'spirit, fire and dew,' and he watched her grow in bodily beauty and in spiritual purity and loveliness. But before the opening of his flower was consummated in its glory of passion and love.

*God's hand beckoned unawares  
And the sweet white brow was all of her.*

'Beautiful Evelyn Hope is dead,' and her lover stands beside her with bowed head and sorrowful gaze. She was the light of his eyes, the throbbing of his heart, the hope, long, long deferred of his life.

There is no doubt that in his past he had suffered and experience had taught him much, for there is no outcry, no rebellion, no despair!

He stands, a mournful figure of 'Love among the Ruins'—but for him there is no

*... girl with eager eyes and yellow hair  
To wait him there'.*

The life of which he had seen Evelyn the central joy was over—the home where she was to have reigned

## ‘POEMS OF LOVE AND DEATH’

as queen was desolate—and he himself once more alone in the world, more alone than ever. His youth too had slipped away. But he was a strong man, one of Browning’s ideals, strong to love, strong to suffer, strong also to wait, and no thought of surrender either to overwhelming grief or to the impossible occurred to him. A year or two ago, it may be, the future had looked to him as a long level road running on into the shadows of old age, then suddenly, the way had changed and led him over the sweet hay-scented meadows of human happiness and promise, until, as suddenly, he was confronted by an impassable obstacle like a great wall of rock and scaur, to right and left, unending.

The spirit of her he loved had ascended the wondrous stairway and entered into Life Eternal and thither through the ages, he would follow in pursuit of her.

*Delayed it may be for more lives yet,  
Through worlds I shall traverse, not a few:  
Much is to learn, much to forget  
Ere the time be come for taking you.*

*But the time will come,—at last it will, . . .*

Ah! how in the already past he had loved, ‘the frank young smile, and the red young mouth and the hair’s young gold,’ but now, even as he stood there, he was changing and somewhere in his longing soul,



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he seemed to speak the words: 'Whither thou goest, I will go; thy God shall be my God.'

Thus did he meet the catastrophe of his life, without appeal or complaint—without even questioning what it meant.

A present day writer says: 'The key to the interpretation of the Cosmos lies in the universal principle of vicarious suffering—not as a penalty, but as a privilege.' Christ is frequently spoken of as the Man of Sorrows, but when He spoke of Himself, it was of His joy! The seed of eternal joy, the active principle of happiness, lies hidden only in self-sacrifice. So Browning writes:

'Renounce joy for fellow's sake! that's joy beyond joy.' The cords of love were round this man and the All-wise and the All-loving had passed them through the little hand that held within it the symbolic leaf, that by her death, in Time, she should draw one more soul into the Kingdom of Love's Eternity.

And here by her side in the quiet darkened room he acknowledged his own imperfection and unworthiness, for he 'had much to learn and much to forget' yet with never a tremor of his determination to meet and vanquish all obstacles of time and circumstance, for within him was the vivifying assurance that:—

*God above*

*Is great to grant as mighty to make,  
And creates the love to reward the love:*



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For when the long probation should be over he knew there would come a rapturous moment, when he could say to her in all the strength of a purified manhood:

*I claim you still for my own love's sake!*

In the present he recognized that the frustration of all his earthly hopes, and their sacrifice assented to by his nobler, purer self, meant Life—the ineffable new Birth of his soul into a new world.

*The new life come in the old one's stead.*

First that which is natural; afterwards that which is spiritual. For surely all pure human love is as a guide-post—a stepping-stone—a gateway into the Heavenly.

It seems as though, so sensitive was the mystical nature of Browning's genius, that it constantly, and apparently without deliberate intention, flowed through the earthly presentment of his thought into loftier spheres.

Like the triple lunar rainbow, that he,

*One, out of a world of men*

saw on that ever memorable Christmas Eve, his first thought frequently merges itself in a higher one

*Fainter, flushier, flightier*

wherein dwells Love in celestial forms. In this poem does he not voice his own faith in a longed for

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immortality and his living hope in an eternal reunion with the Divine? Is not the very name 'Evelyn Hope,' suggestive of that life which man, the Lover of life, yearns after and gazes towards in hope? Has he not been preserved throughout the long, dim ages of the past, a living soul, subjected to unthinkable experiences of trial, suffering and sorrow, in his undying quest to one day attain this Life? In the words of another Prophet Poet, has he not been drawn through the vast æons of his existence 'with cords of a Man, with bands of Love?'

And deeper still, does not the Poet point upwards to a Divine Lover to whom Time is a nothingness, agony and death a joy, and to whom weariness is unknown in the pursuit of the Psyche He loves,—that refound soul to whom in the supreme moment of true reunion He also says:

*I claim you still for my own love's sake!*

Thus in poem after poem does the great Christian poet of these modern times

*Who believed in soul  
Was very sure of God*

reveal his steadfast faith, that to the loving, death is but the pathway to Life, and so draw aside the dark veil of Azrael, that men may see behind it—only the Face of Love.

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*The Love ever growing, in spite of the strife in it,  
Shall arise, made perfect, from Death's repose of it,  
And I shall behold Thee, face to face  
O God! and in Thy Light retrace,  
How in all I loved here, still wast Thou!*



# THE WASTREL



## THE WASTREL

*The Epilogue to Fifine at the Fair*

IN the year 1872, Robert Browning published a remarkable poem, entitled *Fifine at the Fair*. At the beginning of it and again at the end, there is a separate poem, each complete in itself which, like the illuminated covers of a book, hold between them the main poem with its argument.

*The Householder* is said to be one of a few poems once pointed out by Browning, by which he desired to be judged, so that he himself must have thought well of it.

Strangely enough it is but little known and yet the rugged force of the words and rhythm, with their underlying mystery appeal to the mind, when once read, like the gaunt precipitous scaurs of the north; and the quick alternations of emotions and moods—thoughts and problems, seize on the imagination like the lights and shadows of the russet, foam-flaked water, swirling on its tumultuous way in the depths of a mountain gorge.

In reading Browning's poetry, as Mr Symons points out, it is well always to remember, that in reality he writes on only two subjects: 'Life and Thought,' that is:—the dramatic and metaphysical

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which he weaves with inimitable skill into one whole.

The speciality of his genius shows itself in his supreme and undisguised fellow feeling with the individuals who make up humanity. As he said: 'little else is worth study than the incidents in the development of a soul.' All men and women are interesting to him, for in all, there are secret reserves of mystery and of latent potentialities.

In every phase, rank and condition of life, he finds instincts, motives and passions which are the causes of innumerable romances and dramas, many—perhaps mostly tragic! From all sorts of holes and corners, mental, historical and literary, he draws forth living subjects for his mind and heart to expand upon. None are too high and noble, none too low or sordid to touch the chords of his keen and sympathetic sensibility. The scientist and the mill-girl, the lover and the murderer, the poet, the musician, the Bishop, the cheat and the outcast and scores of other incongruous personalities claim his interest and scrutiny.

Each man or woman is to him, a summing up or microcosm of all things—a universe, infinitesimal indeed, but complete. Mrs. Browning shares this idea with him and expresses it in these remarkable words:



## ‘THE HOUSEHOLDER’

*God collected and resumed in man  
The Firmament, the strata and the lights,  
Fish, fowl and beast and insect—all their trains  
Of various life, caught back upon his arm,  
Reorganised and constituted MAN,  
The Microcosm—the adding up of works.*

And this most wonderful and complex creature is of profound interest to the poet, particularly in regard to all the possibilities of his choice of good or evil during the testing time of earthly life and by placing a chosen character in a special concurrence of circumstances, he affords an opportunity for the revelation of those secret impulses which are the issues of a soul's ultimate quality. At such times of stress and excitement, when the real self is freed from the bonds of the ordinary educational and conventional self, Browning patiently and minutely investigates what were the secret processes of thought, which developed in a crisis into this or that particular action? And he makes his characters answer for themselves in the confessional form of the monologue. Thus he heralded the opinion now more and more widely held, that thought is creative, that what a man habitually thinks, gradually forms and moulds the character and probably even the state of physical health, and in so doing prepares him for the part he will play in any temptation or emergency which may arise and confront him.

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As a matter of fact this theory is not truly modern, but has been held since very ancient days. The mystical writer, Treherne, says:

*Thoughts are the springs of all our actions here  
On earth. . .*

and again

*Thoughts are the things  
That us affect: the honey and the stings  
Of all that is, are seated in a thought,  
E'en while it seemeth weak and next to nought.  
The matter of all pleasure, virtue, worth,  
Grief, anger, hate, revenge, which words set forth  
Are thoughts alone. . .*

And a still older writer and one whom we all revere as a mouthpiece of the Divine, writes:

*Hear, O Earth: behold, I will bring upon this people  
. . . the fruit of their thoughts.*

For whatever a man's actions are, their roots are in his mind. These investigations of human nature, however, were not the outcome of mere intellectual curiosity, rather were they those of a deep sympathy. Browning had a strong conviction, that in the hiddenness of every soul there remains something, however blurred and defaced, that bears the impress of the Divine Creator.

*Beneath the veriest ash, there hides a spark of soul  
Which, quickened by love's breath, may yet pervade  
the whole  
Of the grey, and free again, be fire,*

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and this trace of good in evil he desires to make evident, so that all may experience something of the same kindliness and compassion.

In the words of Mr Dawson, ‘The true poet seeks to probe the heart of the world’s sorrow and we turn to him to know what verdict he can give and whether there is any hope.’ Robert Browning’s answer was a Gospel of Hope. In his own last words, he was,

*One who never turned his back but marched breast  
forward,  
Never doubted clouds would break,  
Never dreamed, though right were worsted, wrong  
would triumph,  
Held we fall to rise, are baffled to fight better,  
Sleep to wake.*

Our intellects are captured by the splendour of his genius, but our hearts are comforted by the radiance of his unswerving faith, in the love of the World Father.

The story in the long poem of *Fifine at the Fair* is not, alas! a very uncommon one. The speaker of the monologue is a clever and highly educated man of modern times. He is a man also of wealth and of travel and at the time of the events described was living with his wife at Pornic, a seaside resort in France.

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Possessed of an extremely restless and unsatisfied temperament, everything orderly, permanent and according to law, seems to him to be nothing better than the shackles of a prisoner, to be got rid of whenever possible. He wearies of the quietness and monotony of life, wearies even of the gentle goodness of his wife, Elvire, he longs for change, for excitement and for what looks to him like liberty, but which with him, means only the gratification of some passing fancy. With little or no right principle or love of goodness to restrain him, he acknowledges no curb to the indulgence of his passions, therefore his so-called liberty easily degenerates into license, moral and mental, and as he becomes increasingly selfish and self-centred, so he degenerates quickly and finally abandons himself to the evil and changeableness of his lower nature.

The temptation with which Robert Browning confronts this man forms the great crisis of his life. A travelling circus has come to Pornic, and amongst the actors is a girl of low class but of extreme beauty and daring. He is attracted by its charm.

That evening, while taking a long walk with his wife, he is made by the poet to open his mind and express his thoughts. For many years he has accustomed himself to think falsely and to argue away the truth until evil becomes his idea of good. The

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entanglement of his sophistry holds him throughout the long monologue until, just at the end of it, he wavers, better counsels enter his mind. After all, he says, ‘I know there is no profit in sinning. It only means remorse.’

*The wanderer brings home no profit from his quest  
Beyond the sad surmise that keeping house were best  
Could life begin anew.*

Elvire is worth ‘a Fair-full of Fines!’ Ffine is nothing but ‘a foam-flake,’ Elvire, ‘the solid land, the safe,’ and when in the deepening twilight they reach the door of their beautiful villa, his words sound pathetically natural, as looking at his wife’s white face, he says:

*How pallidly you pause o’ the threshold!  
Hardly night  
Which drapes you, ought to make real flesh and  
blood so white!  
Touch me, and so appear alive to all intents!  
Will the saint vanish from the sinner that repents?  
Quick! give back the hand I grope  
I’ the dusk for!*

and then he impulsively goes on to promise the amendment of his life:

*The Mayor shall catalogue me duly domiciled,*  
and if she, Elvire, will  
*Be but flesh and blood and smile to boot,  
Never to wander more!*

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But alas for good intentions when there is no right principle or stability of will! At that moment, as he stands there making promises, with one hand groping for Elvire,—into the other behind his back, someone on tiptoe slips a note. He is arrested, hesitates, is overcome by the idea of an adventure and hurriedly tells her, he must go.

*O threaten no farewell! Five minutes shall suffice  
To clear the matter up. I go, and in a trice  
Return; five minutes past, expect me! If in vain—  
Why, slip from flesh and blood and play the the  
ghost again!*

These final words are plainly intended to intimate to us that he did not return in the 'five minutes' or in many more, and that his wife either left him or died. The last line, 'Why slip from flesh and blood and play the ghost again,' points rather to her death, and her sudden and inexplicable reappearance in *The Householder*, seems also to confirm this idea.

In this epilogue is portrayed for us in most terse and pungent terms, shorn of every extraneous word and almost brutal in their graphic strength, the bold outlines of a man, dark against a dark background, thus affording from the outset all the charm of mystery. Who is this man? Where is he? What has brought him to this state? In his monologue he answers for himself.

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The Householder, speaking, is apparently at first, alone. He is sitting, as we gather, in a dimly lighted and shadowy room, in an old, tumble-down building. He tells of ‘crumbling time-soiled bricks,’ of murky ghost-inhabited corners, of flapping doors and empty rooms with echoes!

The setting of the picture is significant, it takes on, as indeed do all our surroundings, the colouring and character of our own mental and moral state.

He at once confesses to being in an evil temper. He is bitter, miserable, cynical. Life has evidently gone badly with him and a crisis has at last arrived which he must face. This crisis we presume, is Death. This man has staked his all and lost. The game is up, and it only remains to reckon the cost and pay! We, the audience, therefore, are standing by a broken and ruined man—and one, moreover, who lays the blame on no one, for he is looking at his past as death shows it and we hear his last confession and witness his final effort, by a scoffing, hollow attempt at mirth, to evade the reality of the moment and to bolster up his failing courage by a simulated indifference.

He is essentially a man of moods. Highstrung and excited, straining upon his earthly tether, every incident and thought affects him and he quivers mentally and responds quickly like a human harp. Already time is of little account to him, he is living moment by



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moment in the present. He tells us the hour was late and he was alone, alternating between exhaustion and a savage melancholy. The past is a memory of despair! The future? What of the future? One seems to see those glaring, miserable eyes glance round about him. Future? There shall be *no* future! He will end . . . The words die upon his lips . . .

*When, in a moment, just a knock, call, cry,  
Half a pang and all a rapture . . . !*

and he is no longer alone! A Presence, undoubtedly that of his wife, is with him in the room—a Presence, even more shadowy than that of the man himself, but evidently recognized by him, though only a voice to us. She has come to him unexpectedly, in this, his hour of deepest dejection and temptation, for it seems as though the death he contemplates is not one of Divine appointment, but is to be of his own self-will.

He speaks of a 'long day's work,' for which apparently he has been strong enough. He says: 'Let the fiends who in the darkness seem to crowd upon him,' lay claim,

*Make and mend, or rap and rend, for me!*

and he even describes his final act in the coarse words, indicating the coarse and cowardly deed he meditates, when he adds:

*Till, crash, down comes the carcase in a heap!*



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But she is with him, his Elvire, his wife! To us she is invisible, she comes we know not whence, enters his presence we know not how, but to him, she is a real living woman and for the moment is welcome!

Then suddenly, the recollection of what is in his mind recurs to him, he remembers that in the past, she and he never agreed with regard to the supreme questions of life and conduct. A feeling awakens in him of having been taken at a disadvantage. She is there and can see too much of his utter failure and disgrace,—a failure and disgrace which she had probably foreseen and foretold. Moreover her presence was a restraint, as indeed it was intended to be, for he could not carry out his intention under her very eyes.

Go, he says, this is no place for you

*Quick . . . hie away from this old house*

*Every crumbling brick embrowned with sin and  
shame!*

*. . . Goodbye! Goodbye!*

Thus he urges her to return whence she came. But his desire, his farewell are alike ignored. He needs her, and that is an all-sufficient reason for remaining! How marvellously all through this poem, the quiet strength of good is brought into relief, against the hurried storm-tossed changeableness of evil! What

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exquisite dignity in her bearing and answers is contrasted with the complaining weakness, the paltry levity of his speech! Evidently, she is to him just his wife as she had been in the past of life, even her mysterious entrance does not appear to affect his attitude towards her and he speaks to her after his own old fashion, welcomes, orders, claims sympathy, rejects it and insults her, as if they two were still on the same earth plane, he, the overbearing husband, and she, the bearing and forbearing wife. She stays and to his brutal words she gives an answer, which is the most enigmatic in the whole poem. Browning, as one critic of his style has written, 'thought always at full speed,' and this peculiarity of his mind is the cause of much which seems obscure in his utterances. He darts from thought to thought, from mind to mind of the characters he is analysing and is unaware of the immense difficulties which his readers with slower intelligences must encounter, in following him in these mental acrobatic feats.

*Till, crash, comes down the carcase in a heap,  
quoth I:*

*Nay, but there's a decency required! quoth She.*

At first sight there seems no evident connexion between his speech and hers, but there is a deep and curious touch of character painting in it and as deep and curious a knowledge of human nature.

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In Elvire's character, as shown in the introductory quotation from Molière and also in her remarks as they are echoed in her husband's monologue in the course of the main poem, there is a decided streak of irony and in this mysterious reply of hers Browning allows her to remain true to this individual characteristic, which raises, by the way, the very interesting problem of how far personal idiosyncrasies may or may not be modified or changed by change of sphere from this world to the next. Elvire, now made acquainted by the man himself with his idea of self-destruction, though we, who are behind scenes divine, know that it was on purpose to save him from this last sin that she was sent, turns upon him, with this weapon of hers and put into ordinary words, she says to him, with the slightest raise of her eyebrows and the tenderest little movements about her mouth: ‘Ah! really, so low as that! Fallen so far? You, the man of the world, the refined artist, musician, the lover of the beautiful, and the philosopher! you mean to die in this coarse and ugly manner? Nay, from you—at least, some decency of mode is required! If you will die, die in accordance with yourself.’ Now in the state of mind to which evil had brought this man probably no higher appeal could have been of any use. His mind warped by sophistry, his argumentative power always greater than hers, his emotions

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perverted and diseased through self-indulgence, there was only one vulnerable spot left and Elvire's shaft, small as it was, went straight to the point. He had always prided himself that he was a cultured gentleman, and if he had chosen to dally with that, which in itself was ignoble and sensual, he had always given himself an excellent reason for doing so, one in fact which he flattered himself was based on a true predilection for beauty in whatever guise he found it. Elvire's words, therefore, revealed to him in a flash, that he had degenerated in respect of this, his one remaining ideal, and perceiving at once that he must justify his intention to her, his mood changes, melancholy again claims him, and he turns to her for sympathy. Moan after moan escapes him. Excuse after excuse is upon his lips.

*Ah, but if you knew how time has dragged, days,  
nights!*

the talk, the people, the worry—

*If you knew but how I dwelt down here!*

How beautiful her reply. What a world of thought it opens for us. What a large sympathetic heart beat in the man, who put those words into a woman's mouth.

*And was I so better off up there?*

Opinions must differ widely as to whether those

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who have passed into the Spirit world, know how life goes with us, whom they have left behind them here. In the beautiful words of the Prologue, does the soul who

*... has for its home the whole  
Of heaven, thus look beneath,  
Thus watch ...*

us as we thread our way across the desolate stretches, along the dark valleys, and through the tangled jungles of this life? Does it, ‘look, pity, wonder’? Robert Browning indicates that he thinks it does, and more—that it may sometimes be permitted to come back to warn, to comfort. In this he is not alone, for thus does our great poet Edmund Spenser write of the angels:

*How oft do they their silver bowers leave  
To come to succour us that succour want;  
How oft do they with golden pinions cleave  
The flitting skies, like flying pursuivant—  
Against foul fiends to aid us militant!  
They for us fight: they for us watch and ward,  
And their bright squadrons round about us plant,  
And all for love and nothing for reward.*

Elvire is pictured for us, as absolutely herself. Her personalty the same as ever. She has not in her home ‘up there’ forgotten the sinning, sorrowful, struggling man whom, in spite of everything, she

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loves and surely if a guardian spirit be sent to any of us, who more fit to be a channel for the Power of Divine Love than the purified and faithful heart of the old bosom friend, be it man or wife, parent or child?

*To be near us when we climb or fall  
To watch, like God, the rolling hours  
With larger other eyes than ours  
To make allowance for us all.*

What more perfect bliss could the All Loving devise than the commission to such an one to save and strengthen the beloved down here?

*Renounce joy for fellow's sake? That's joy beyond  
joy!*

‘And was I so better off up there? Do you think I could forget?’ What a sigh of patient yet determined love breathes through these words. And how did the man reply? One fancies he ought at least to have responded gratefully! Not so. His mood changes again instantly. He takes her sorrowful sympathy for pity—his pride rises,—the pride of this miserable wastrel! He has blundered, he thinks, he has exposed to her his failure, has virtually acknowledged that he is worsted in his battle, irretrievably worsted. She pities him! But pity is for the weak! Does she think he needs it—he will have none of it! He will show her his strength, will play the old game yet once

## ‘THE HOUSEHOLDER’

more and hide his disgrace from her under a mockery, and so try to bluff her into thinking that he is reckless of the future and will die as he has lived contemptuous of death! She, at any rate, shall not know, that he either cares or fears!

### *Reunited to his wife*

he scoffs

*(How draw up the paper, lets the parish people know?)*

*Lies M. or N. departed from this life, . . .*

*What in the way of final flourish? Prose? Verse? . . .*

*Affliction sore long time he bore, or, what is it to be?*

And after all—this hideous grotesque levity, this perchance final convulsion of evil—is ineffective, for the calm Presence beside him is unmoved. Rent and torn by the demon within him the irritable wretchedness of his appeal to her in his last two words, tells its own tale. ‘Do end,’ he cries, and we are left so far as the man is concerned with a profound sense of utter impotence and collapse.

All the possible treasures of life, all the wonderful might-have-beens are behind him and gone for ever. Pandora’s Casquet is open, ills and woes unutterable are in the present but true to his creed, Browning will not give up hope. The lid is shut down sharp and hope is saved! Then as the weird scream of the whirlwind and the tempest dies away, a voice gentle and ineffably sweet, goes out into the future:



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*'I end with—Love is all and death is nought!' quoth She.*

This is the story as we have it sketched for us. The thread is not snapped off, but vanishes. It has disappeared into an impenetrable haze.

But how did the Householder's story begin—where is the clue? Wordsworth tells us 'the Child is the Father of the Man' and in Mr Ealand's *Sermons from Browning*, he says: 'The soul is no chance product of the moment. It is 'the heir of all the past and the Father of the future.' We have seen 'the heir of all the past,' now where is 'the father.'

*The Prologue. Amphibian.*

Could anything be a greater contrast either in form or scene or atmosphere? The two poems are absolutely diverse. We have left the land of groaning for a world of light. Beautiful words and similes follow one another in sweetest strains. A summer sea, a glorious sun—his rays seem to envelop us in life! In the hot silence of the noon-day we hear the faint, gurgling lap, lap, of lazy wavelets as they run amongst and kiss the pebbles, too lazy even to rise and cover them. We feel the subtile drawing of the water as out there in the bay:

*The waves laugh warm and clear.*

What wonder if the young man in all his strength and joy of existence, soon found himself 'far out,'



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basking on the very softest bed which Mother Nature has provided,—every smallest muscle of his supple body soothed and supported by the most perfect adaptability,—every bodily sense surrendered to its utmost gratification, and as he swayed there:

*Heaven above, sea under*

in all the oneness with nature which knows no loneliness, what wonder if his soul, too, gave birth to long, long thoughts and delicate interchanges of earthly and spiritual intuitions.

A butterfly, in all the beauty of its new birth, floated over him on ‘sun-suffused’ and wondrous wings and, in an instant, it was to him no mere insect, but a soul,—the lovely Psyche of a young man’s day-dream; so close, but ‘a hand-breadth over-head’ and yet they were as far apart as east from west. He owned the sea, and she, the radiant air. Both ‘were alone.’ He had suddenly awakened to a sense of loneliness—that of an inherent difference in nature and sphere. He knew that his body of flesh severed them, neither could that ethereal creature come to him.

*I never shall join its flight,  
For, nought buoys flesh in air.  
If it touch the sea—good night!  
Death sure and swift waits there.*

Companionship is impossible. The brooding allegory

## THE WASTREL

in his mind develops. Suppose, he says to himself, if this butterfly were really a soul, that in the first flush of its springtime, let fall the garment of its flesh, the dark, protecting covering of its earthly life and so, made free, could, having

*for its home the whole  
Of heaven, thus look beneath,  
Thus watch one who, in the world,  
Both lives and likes life's way . . . ?*

Mrs Sutherland Orr calls this poem 'a vision,' because the youth, by premonition sees something of his future and no doubt we, at any rate, are intended in this beautiful symbolism, to see Elvire the wife, Elvire the spirit and are, in some measure, prepared for the part she plays, especially in *The Householder*.

The sea has become for him the world—that world where in life's fine weather, a man may disport himself and take his ease, where he may float in a delicious idleness, where every bodily delight and appetite is arranged for and adjusted just to his liking. No hardness in his bed! No interference with his perfect selfish pleasure! He wills and the world laps round and caresses him like the sea. He lives in the world and likes it and desires no other: 'He lives and likes life's way'

## ‘THE HOUSEHOLDER’

*Nor wishes the wings unfurled  
That sleep in the worm, they say.*

Browning compares the worldling to a caterpillar and a human caterpillar indeed he is, he lives to eat—for self-gratification!

Thus Browning shows us with unmistakeable clearness how it came about that the apparently innocent lad, floating in the noontide enjoyment, was then and there the embryo ‘Householder,’ for it is not the being in the world, but the love of it that matters. But this youth has intellect though intellect is mostly at a discount in Vanity Fair. Sometimes there may be too much of the coarsest element even for him. Too much ‘noise and dust,’ he is not all body. The wings are not unfurled, it is true, but they are there, he can think of something more than eating and drinking, gambling and fashion, marrying and giving in marriage.

Then says he:

*In the sphere which overbrims  
With passion and thought, why just  
Unable to fly, one swims!*

Now swimming is a movement assuredly of greater energy, and of a higher phase, than mere floating, but he is still in the sea, still in the world and of it. He continues:

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*By passion and thought upborne,  
One smiles to oneself—They fare  
Scarce better, they need not scorn  
Our sea, who live in the air!*

Intellect, like the ocean, buoys him up, but he is just as much the voluptuary as before, he has only changed his point of view.

What smug self-satisfaction there is in this verse! Who minds the spiritual, he seems to say, when Art, Music, Literature and Science are within reach of a man with money, leisure and culture? Who wants more, he cries, in his reckless pride of life? Not I, at any rate, my sea is but little lower than the air, no need to envy those who fly, while one can swim.

Moreover he is so refined, so delicate, so epicurean, this young man, that:

*emancipate through passion,  
And thought, with sea for sky,*

he will

*... Substitute in a fashion  
For heaven ... poetry ...*

This he feels will be all the mind needs. It will express for him anything and everything, all of thought, all of passion. It will be Byron, Shelley, Arnold, Swinburne as he wills and in them he will revel and eat and drink as his self desires. In them he will find the enjoyment that

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*A finer element*

*Affords the spirit sort*

Poetry shall be henceforth to him a divine pretence—a dream in which there shall be action, state, knowledge, and the dream shall be his reality of Heaven and Heaven shall be to him a dream.

*Whatever they are, we seem:*

*Imagine the thing, they know:*

*All deeds they do, we dream;*

*Can heaven be else but so?*

Yet all the same, some instinct of danger, some misgiving, a possibility of eventual weariness or satiety—a vague fear of the chances and changes of the earthly is faintly evident. ‘Ah! but,’ he sighs, and we feel him move impatiently in his pliant bed, ‘that streak there, where sky and sea meet upon the far horizon,

*That is the land to seek*

*If we tire or dread the surge.*

*Land the solid and safe . . .*

not really far off, quite easy to reach. One can always turn over a new leaf, always strike out for the land, where one settles down and does one’s duty.

*When high and dry, we chafe*

*The body and don the dress . . .*

of respectability and so be once more smugly self-satisfied. The vagrant can become, when he will, a Householder!

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So, lying there, floating and thinking, he sees nothing of the cloud small as a man's hand behind him, he is not aware of a slight lessening of the summer sunshine. The sea is still warm, he has no suspicion of a sudden chilliness of the atmosphere or of a certain stillness in the air, or of a curious darkening of the circumflowing water. His world-logged ears do not hear the deep moaning sough of the rising storm. Out in the offing there is already a tossing of white horses and a heaving swell, but he is floating still and wondering if, after all, his *Psyche* is watching him.

*Heaven above, sea under  
Yet always land in sight . . .*

And here the poet leaves him. He has found and shown the weak spot in his character, has given the clue of the labyrinth into our hands.

In the main poem of *Fifine at the Fair*, according to his dramatic method, Browning places this youth many years later in a crisis, for which we are left to infer he has gradually prepared himself. Given his choice of good or evil, he is easily betrayed by the unchecked love of self, corporeal and mental, and he chooses evil. He is a true worldling, but all through the long monologue in which he reveals himself, he is a cultured gentleman, a musician, an artist, a poet

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and, above all else, a Sophist. He really cares for Elvire as an embodiment to him of all that is good and pure, and he wishes to remain her hero; on the other hand he has yielded himself captive to evil, knowing it evil, though he is too refined and perhaps too nervous and cowardly to allow thought to pass into act, without an effort at self-deception. Therefore, from every side of his complex nature, rational, artistic, emotional and intellectual he argues, starting with the enunciation of a truth which with consummate ingenuity he insensibly brings to a conclusion which is a complete perversion of his premises.

Browning has by some writers been sharply criticized for this. The man's self-deception is described with such fine subtlety that it is difficult for the acutest critic to determine exactly where the straight line of right reasoning is departed from and curves round into the false. In permitting this without comment or condemnation, it has been said, that in some way, he condones the sin it led to, excusing it as something not logically to be helped.

Now considering the grandeur of Browning's character, the intensity of his love and admiration for his wife, and his high ideal of conduct in general, such denseness of judgment is, as a recent writer remarks, ‘a mystery,’ and must have been a cause of real and most unmerited annoyance to its victim. It is

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true the poet does not in words condemn. He is depicting a certain phase of character and he allows the sower to sow the wind after his own fashion; but surely, no one who thoughtfully reads the concluding poem of *The Householder* can fail to see that therein he plainly declares that the harvest of such a sowing is misery, despair, death.

But what is the meaning of the title?

The word House implies a putting together of various parts to form a whole in which a man can dwell. This man is the Householder,—in a mystic sense also the Builder.

It is possible, perhaps probable, that he who we are studying may have been still inhabiting the beautiful villa at Pornic. Luscious wines and delicious viands may have been daily on his table. Silver and glass and lights may have glittered around him. His priceless picture by Raphael may have looked upon him from the wall, sweet strains of music may have sounded in his ears, luxurious couches have invited him to rest and a score of gay and witty comrades been seated at his hearth. He may have been in a veritable hotbed of ease and comfort, so far as his outward life was concerned; but the House that he really lived in, the House he had built for himself, was that state of mind formed gradually throughout the long years of his human life while he dallied



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with self and sin, for it is the universal law that every living soul, ay, every living creature, shall become a Householder!

In truth he is now alone and weary, savage and desperate.

The artificial delights of life, are now as

*bricks embrowned with sin and shame*

mouldering and falling apart. Through their cracks and chinks cold and piercing winds search out and freeze his very core. The winter of his misery sends shuddering wraiths of snow to lie across the floor, even at his feet.

The sudden flaring of his passion pours over him a scathing heat from the desert of his mind, and he says of himself:

*Head of me, heart of me, stupid as a stone:*

*Tongue-tied now, now blaspheming like a Turk.*

Memories echo in the empty places of his heart. Corners are there of awful gloom where fiendish forms he dreads to face, lurk and laugh. His tortured mind sees phantoms, brings forth fancies—fantastic shapes ‘whose dark arts’ drive him towards despair.

He wavers desperately between his agonized fear of them and the fierce desire which goads him on to know and meet the worst.

What a picture of the remorse of a self-ruined

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man! Once when a youth poetry was to be his dream of heaven. Now he wanders horror-stricken in a waking nightmare of hell!

The tempest truly has arisen; it howls about him. He is no longer floating on a summer sea, he is swimming now for life. Where is the land 'solid and safe' he thought so near? Alas! It is blotted out. A wild turmoil of psychic waters has engulfed him, he has lost his bearings, he is sinking! Ha! what was that? Whose was that call? Was that 'cry' his or another's? Was that his own voice he heard in a cry for help? Is there still a place for repentance? Was help at hand?

Some power had hold of him, for into the blackness, into the thick of the storm, into the deep trough of evil Love came to seek, and find, perchance to save.

He breathes again. It is not all over then. Death is at bay now, not he! and in a revulsion of feeling, 'Half a pang and all a rapture,' he exclaims:

*What, and is it really you again?*

*'I again, what else did you expect?' quoth She.*

Who else could he expect but Love? Who else in all his universe would have strength and courage and patience and will enough to seize his drowning soul and fight death for it? So to this man Love came, in the guise of Elvire his wife.

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Somewhere in the depths of every human soul, whatever may have been the wrongdoing, there are left, stored up from infancy, seeds of good, which are capable, at a right time, of being warmed into life, for the conversion and reconstruction of the ruin. This was Browning's belief! This was Elvire's mission. She may have been, a thrill of conscience, a recollection of some old thought or place, the memory of a prayer, of a mother's smile or kiss, or of a thousand other long forgotten things. She may have been a living flesh and blood woman come to bring such comfort and solace as she could to a dying and unhappy husband. The poet does not say, but he does tell us, that he believes that, ignoring all repulse, Love will hold persistently to every son of man, be he what he will, and he condenses his belief in the words of hope

*‘I end with—Love is all and Death is nought,’ quoth She*

The curtain drops. The story so far is told. Two figures slowly fade away into the nothingness which hides the end.

Would Love win?

*Oh yet we trust that somehow good  
Will be the final goal of ill  
To pangs of hunger, sins of will  
Defects of doubt and taints of blood.*

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*Behold we know not anything  
I can but trust that good shall fall  
At last—far off—at last to all  
And every winter change to spring.*

The refrain comes back again from Robert Browning,

*My own hope is a sun will pierce  
The thickest cloud earth ever stretched  
That after Last, returns the First  
Though a wide compass round be fetched  
That what began best can't end worst  
Or what God blessed once, prove accurst.*

True, it is only a hope, but who that has a heart does not know something of that profound tremor of the soul which makes a hope into a prayer.

*The wish that of the living whole  
No life may fail beyond the grave  
Derives it not from what we have  
The likeliest God within the soul?*

And again Browning answers Tennyson:

*Do I find love so full in my nature, God's ultimate Gift  
That I doubt His own Love can compete with it? Here  
the parts shift,  
Here the creature surpass the Creator—the end what  
began?  
Would I fain in my impotent yearning do all for this man,  
And dare doubt, that He alone shall not help him, Who  
yet alone can?*

## ‘THE HOUSEHOLDER’

In the Tate Gallery there are two pictures, by our greatest allegorical painter, Watts, which seem somewhat to illuminate the shimmering impenetrable haze. In the one there is a steep hillside, scanty mountain grass, worn bare by innumerable feet, where the grey foundation rock crops out along the rugged upward path.

*The great world's altar stairs*

*That slope through darkness up to God.*

And thereon, we see in the perfection of Divine health and strength the lithe and god-like figure of a youth, who, with violets springing under his feet, and above his head the mountain vanishing into a golden mist, holds firmly by the hand, beneath his sheltering wings, a shrinking human form, thin, haggard, tottering, toiling—but ascending—aye—forced to mount by that impelling power which draws.

It is ‘Love leading Life’—Human Life as we have made it. The other picture is the open vault of Heaven and into the centre of the Blue, that same Divine Youth, radiant and conquering, with a countenance of ineffable joy, rises with celestial strength, while down below him, prone upon the ground, lie three dead bodies, Sin, Death, Judgment!

The glowing coal from off the Altar has touched both the poet and the painter—the lips of one, the

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eyes of the other, and the heart of each responds, to faith in Love illimitable, and ultimately Triumphant; for

... '*Love is all and Death is nought!*' quoth *She*.

'Watchman, what of the Night?' and the Watchman answers:

*Out of the shadow of Night  
The world rolls into Light  
It is Daybreak—everywhere.*

# THE SUFFERER





# THE SUFFERER

THE POEM *of Ixion* belongs to the later period of Browning's literary life. It is to be found in a volume entitled *Jocoseria*, published in 1883, only six years before his death. He was therefore well advanced in years when it was written.

Sir Henry Jones says of him:— 'Browning has, at bottom, only one way of looking at the world and one way of treating his objects, one point of view and one artistic method. Nay, further, he has one supreme interest, which he pursues everywhere with a constancy shown by hardly any other poet.' This supreme interest was the study of men and women—the following up with untiring patience and profound insight the subtle and frequently tortuous windings of the mind, influenced by temperament, training and circumstance and by reflex action creating and moulding character. The remarkable union in him of the genius both of the poet and the philosopher gave to this interest the nature of a passion and accorded him a power of discernment unsurpassed by any other poet except Shakespeare.

'There are few forms of human character he has not studied,' says Sir Henry Jones again, 'and each individual he has so caught at the supreme moment

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of his life, and in the hardest stress of circumstance, that the inmost working of his nature is revealed.'

As a dramatist Robert Browning always recognized this supreme moment, 'when the soul awakened by some special emotion entered its own confessional, with unerring judgment.' As an artist he saw that the monologue was the best and most natural literary method for its expression. It mattered little to him to what rank, country or historical period, the human lyre belonged, whose taut strings were to convey to his sympathetic ear the rhythmic vibrations of its own mind or heart.

Thus the fabulous Greek hero of five or six thousand years ago, was just as prolific of interest, as the man or woman of the Middle Ages or the gentlemanly cynic of these modern times. Human nature, *au fond*, has altered little in its fifty or eighty thousand years of existence and its passions of love or hatred, joy or sorrow, hope or despair still utter their shouts or cries on the same notes.

Before taking up the story of *Ixion* it will be helpful to spare a few moments for the consideration of the first poem of the series to which it belongs. It is very short but extremely beautiful and it forms a prologue to those it precedes.

*Wanting is—What?*

We may almost say that the Poet's whole life, was

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the answer to this question. All through Nature and indeed throughout life itself, there is an underlying sense of something lacking, an emptiness which asks for filling, a desire which seeks attainment, an unfinishedness which leaves the soul unsatisfied. It lurks beneath all pleasure, it is inside all beauty, at the back of all laughter and it is the whip of all aspiration.

*Wanting is—what?  
Summer redundant,  
Blueness abundant,  
—Where is the blot?*

*Beamy the world, yet a blank all the same,  
—Framework which waits for a picture to frame:  
What of the leafage, what of the flower?  
Roses embowering with nought they embower!  
Come then, complete incomplection, O comer,  
Pant through the blueness, perfect the summer!  
Breathe but one breath  
Rose-beauty above,  
And all that was death  
Grows life, grows love,  
Grows love!*

This is the message he is never weary of giving! It may not be the fulness of the whole message, which we, as mankind are destined to receive one day, but it is a very large part of it. A part also that cannot be done without. For the duality of great

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Spiritual Forces, must be, not only known to the world, but born into it as a Unity, before the world can be saved. In the school-room of Time, the letters of the divine alphabet of eternity are being taught to Man, one by one, slowly but surely for 'God has forever.'

Man desired first Knowledge. He said: 'I will have all the knowledge I can acquire, of evil as well as of good.' That was his primal mistake. He has certainly had an abundance of the knowledge of evil.

Knowledge in great variety we have and not a little. Age after age it has been accumulating and the rate of accumulation gains impetus as well as amount, as the ages pass.

*Wanting is—What?*

The first answer was knowledge for 'Knowledge is Power' said the Thinkers. But can it be said that knowledge has made of this a happy world, a clean world or a good world? With so much knowledge, why the weariness, the sickness, the misery, the sin?

*Wanting is—what?*

'O Comer,' cries the poet, 'Breathe on these slain that they may live' so that:

... all that was death  
Grows life, grows love,  
Grows love!

## ‘I X I O N’

Knowledge as knowledge, says Browning, rightly or wrongly, has failed. It has made us neither good nor wise nor happy. I tell you, ‘Wanting is—Love,’ for Love is Power. So through a long life he insisted, Love is over you, Love is in you. Man is appointed to a Divine fulfilling. He has an eternal and glorious destiny. Every particle of his immortal principle must be tried, purified, strengthened, trained to some degree of perfection. What matters the road to the Apotheosis? Welcome the trial which means endurance, the catastrophe which makes for courage, the failure which precedes success, the death which underlies the resurrection.

If ever a man loved his fellows Robert Browning did: he thought into them because he loved them. He was not oblivious of their wrong thinking or their evil-doing, but he ever saw through to the angel which every man may be, and in some dim far off fashion is—in the eyes of the Comer who breathes on him.

*Beneath the veriest ash, there hides a spark of soul  
Which, quickened by Love's breath, may yet pervade  
the whole  
O' the grey, and free again, be fire!*

We are told in the preamble to the poem and also by Ixion himself that he was, when on earth, a king of the old Greek country of Thessaly.

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*I was of Thessaly king, there ruled and a  
people obeyed me:*

*Mine to establish the law, theirs to obey  
it or die:*

*Wherefore? Because of the good to the people,  
because of the honour*

*Thence accruing to me, king, . . .*

Evidently he lived before the days of democracy and the rights of the people. Yet, according to Browning's idea, he was not altogether without thought for them, though it is to be feared his own state and advantage was uppermost, neither was he without a sense, that there might be and probably was miscarriage of justice, and in a passage of great beauty he is made to express this.

*What of the weakling, the ignorant criminal? . . .*

*Nay, but the feeble and foolish, the poor  
transgressor, of purpose*

*No whit more than a tree, born to erectness  
of bole, . . .*

*Where is the vision may penetrate earth and  
beholding acknowledge*

*Just one pebble at root ruined the straightness  
of stem?*

Was he, the king, responsible for that pebble or for the wind that bent or the snow which broke, for the gnawing insect or any other injury that ruined the tree?

## ‘I X I O N’

*King—I was man, no more: what I recognized  
faulty I punished,  
Laying it prone: be sure, more than a man  
had I proved.*

had the hidden causes of wickedness been recognized early enough to have prevented or arrested the consequent ruin.

But whatever he may have been as a king, as a man, he appears to have been anything but a good character. He loved and married Dia, promising to pay well for her according to old time custom, but he broke his word and thereupon his father-in-law took the matter into his own hands and stole some of Ixion's horses. The latter in anger and revenge decoyed his father-in-law to his house and tricked him into a fiery snare prepared for him. Horror and hatred followed this murder and madness came upon him. But Zeus for some reason commiserated him, and purified and restored by the god, he became a guest at Olympus and sat with the gods at their Table.

*Summoned to enter their circle, I sat—their  
equal, how other? . . .*

*‘I am thy friend, be mine!’ smiled Zeus: . . .*

But alas! Ixion again broke the law of hospitality, one of the strictest of that age, for he fell in love with the beautiful Heré, the Queen of Heaven, and was

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by the order of the furious Zeus carried away by Hermes, the Messenger of the gods, and sentenced to be bound by brazen thongs to a wheel, darting flames like fiery serpents, and to be hung up under the great vault of Tartarus, the place of punishment, there to expiate his crime for ever: Thus did he fall—

*Then from Olympus to Erebes, then from the  
rapture to torment,  
Then from the fellow of gods—misery's  
mate, to the man!*

and now—

*High in the dome, suspended, of Hell, sad  
triumph, behold us! . . .  
Whirling for ever in torment, flesh once  
mortal, immortal  
Made—for a purpose of hate—able to die  
and revive,*

Flesh that

*Pays to the uttermost pang, then, newly for  
payment replenished,  
Doles out—old yet young—agonies ever afresh.*

This was indeed a refinement of vindictiveness and we are told with terrible detail how the awful rush of the wheel, ceaselessly revolving, drew out of the victim's body:



## ‘I X I O N’

*... the bestowment of Zeus, soul's vaunted  
bodily vesture, ...*

*... A sparklike spray of flesh become vapour  
thro' pain,*

which rose, caught up into the void above him,  
where it became a rainbow overhead.

Such is the mythological legend of the sin and ex-  
piation of Ixion, the old Greek hero and king. One  
asks its origin? But how shall one disentangle the  
truth in it from the false? How discover the vague  
meaning in the barbarous form?

Mythology is the science of probing these ancient  
myths to discover the event or idea hidden in the  
tangled web of curious notions respecting Physical  
Science, Man and abstract Truth. It is therefore  
quite possible that these myths, may contain in  
them, the odds and ends, in ruin and confusion, of  
some primitive revelation, which, pure and good to  
begin with, may, as we now know has been the case  
with the old religion of Egypt, have become broken  
up by the disintegrating influence of time and dis-  
torted into utter falseness by the effects of hyper-  
symbolism, ritual, formalism and such like errors,  
until the original Truths being forgotten even by  
the priesthood and initiated, nothing would remain  
but seemingly monstrous tales of wickedness and  
folly.

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However that may be, as long ago as 500 B.C., thoughtful men tried to explain these stories, for although, they constituted a religion for the ignorant and credulous populace, the more highly educated and refined, while allowing them to be useful to their social inferiors, criticized or disbelieved them amongst themselves and sometimes openly scoffed at them, as well they might.

Among these sceptics are many great names, such as Heraclitus, Socrates and Euripedes. One named Euhemerus, 316 B.C., calls them history in disguise, the gods, he said, were once men, whose deeds became exaggerated and distorted by the prevalent ancestor worship. Another suggested that they were allegorical accounts of the wars of the elements, fire, air, earth and water, and that the names of the gods represented moral and intellectual qualities.

This links itself on to that explanation which now-a-days seems to be a favoured theory.

The old thinkers of long ago, seeing the marvels of earth, sky and sea, and especially of sky, and having no true science by which to understand them, though feeling that some interpretation was necessary, tried to overcome the immense difficulty of expressing their conjectures in abstract terms, by speaking of all natural phenomena or their qualities as living personalities.

## ‘I X I O N’

Thus the great physical powers and laws of Nature became to them kings, rulers, gods and demi-gods, —Zeus the Bright one, the Air or Ether God, beyond and above all. Other processes which seemed to them less strong, were called queens, goddesses and nymphs who were the objects of ardent love and admiration amongst their compeers.

The genders and pronouns of words and names used must have helped to divide these personified ideas into sexes, and hence, very possibly, formed a source of the apparently absolute disregard of morality which is so striking a feature of mythology: ‘The silly, senseless and savage element,’ so called by Professor Max Müller. When these myths were in process of construction such difference of sex would be understood and therefore there would be no real question of morality connected with them. But as this became obscured by time, difficulties would naturally arise.

Now of all the wonders of Nature so incomprehensible to the primitive intelligence, the most fascinating appear to have been, the change of seasons and the revolution of the heavenly bodies. With the curious regard and simple inquiring mind of childhood, early man watched day by day and night by night the mysterious sky and its denizens.

There was the sun, its rising and setting, its power

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to bless or to wither, to bring to life or to kill by its heat stroke, all to be accounted for. There were gentle zephyrs that seemed to kiss brown cheeks and hurricanes which laid low homes and trees and lashed the waters of the quiet lake or ocean into fury. These too must be explained. There was the rainbow with its promise and its seven colours, always in the same order and a thousand other inexplicable marvels too great for speech. Moreover, these wonders were all active and more or less powerful, and action and power mean life and a living, thinking Being to act. No doubt in the sun, some fine old poet might conceive a strong man, a great hero who was forced by some higher controlling power to go round and round the mother Earth as on a wheel; but of course he must have done some terrible wrong to merit such a punishment, and so the Hidden One, the Lord of the Upper Air had fixed him there for ever, in that huge vault, which glowed with heat, was thick with mist and storm, through which glanced the fiery serpents of death and the roar of anger, the rushing wind of stricken agony and the wailing appeal for help. Oh, that terrible Zeus! who had such power but only seldom showed it in mercy and beneficence, for it is pain, sorrow, tyranny and death which impress man most and which he instinctively feels to be unnatural.

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Probably Ixion was a sun god, whose deeds as an earth king got woven in with some old seer's dreams.

At one time he saw him as the friend of Zeus in glory, but he had kissed the Lower Air, the beautiful Queen Heré, with his sweet south wind. He loved her to distraction and sought to make her his own. Following, following ceaselessly, day in, day out—he loved her in the brightness,—he caught her in the cloud. Ah! that was his crime! That was why Zeus was furious and sentenced his rival to whirl along for ever, to pant upwards from the east higher and higher, to fall—always to fall again into the west.

Sometimes they called him Sisyphus, the man who was fated to toil up the steep heights of heaven with a great rock, which rolled down again just before he gained the sunny Olympus of Zeus. He was parched with thirst too. Always he dreamed of cool water and luscious fruit. Was there not ever in front of him the glistening Ocean in the west, and the Islands with the Palms and their burden of sweet fruit? Dying, agonizing, he rushes forward, but the water dries away before him and the fruit withers. He reaches towards the clouds and lo, they are not, he strives to catch the raindrops, but before his raging heat they melt away! Poor Tantalus! It is the

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story of the attainable, sought in tears and sweat and blood, but still always not quite attained.

So much for the myth of Ixion. It caught on to the imagination of Browning. He recognized its tragedy—its beauty! He did more, leaving the merely historic and pseudo-scientific significations behind, he perceived in it that which bore upon the thoughts always more or less before his mind. Those of man's suffering and responsibility, of his ideals and destiny and of the relationship with regard to these in which he believed the true God to stand.

In the torture and impotence of Ixion, he saw the pain, the underlying sorrow and inexpressible heart-searchings of humanity. It was no fable for him, but a reality enacted under his very eyes, entering into his own life and moving at his side in every country, city and street. It was not the journey of the sun through space or that of one man possibly existent 6,000 years ago, but the life-story of souls alive now, of men and women fast bound to the great revolving wheel of life—the ceaseless revolution of the everyday, and he must once more endeavour to comfort his fellows and justify his God.

Suffering in some form or other seems to be co-existent with organic life. The facts of geology cannot be gainsaid. Physical pain and physical death were apparently in the world before man was created. With man and the enlargement of the area of life to

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the rational and the spiritual, came also a corresponding possible enlargement of the area of suffering. Man's degeneration from pristine innocence developed this possibility into actuality and man became ‘born to trouble as the sparks fly upward.’

In this poem Robert Browning has voiced for us, in the imaginary thoughts and experiences of Ixion, some of the greatest problems of existence. Man's intelligence still erects itself against his Creator and demands a reason for the presence of sin, the justice of eternal punishment and the purpose of suffering. It is in connection with this last especially that the poet makes Ixion answer his own questionings.

Lamenting and arguing on the wheel, ‘ordained his place of reposing’—regarding himself as the victim of a god's revenge, he awoke to the understanding of facts which had hitherto been either unknown to him or seen without any proper relationships, as the mind sees things in a dream.

*Foiled by my senses, I dreamed; I doubtless  
awaken in wonder.*

and he tells us how:

*Body, professed soul's slave, which serving  
beguiled and betrayed her,  
Made things false seem true, cheated thro'  
eye and thro' ear,  
Lured thus heart and brain to believe in the  
lying reported,—*



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He next investigates the special cause of his miserable state and comes to the conclusion that, having caught a glimpse of his own worth and vaguely perceived in himself, 'a god tho' in the germ,' he had become puffed up with vanity, and magnifying this worth, had seen himself through his false imagination, not only as the friend, but as the equal of the gods he thought he worshipped.

*Ask of myself, whose form melts on the murderous wheel,*

*What is the sin, that throe and throe prove sin to the sinner! . . .*

*Man among men I had borne me till gods forsooth must regard me*

*—Nay, must approve, applaud, claim as a comrade at last.*

*Summoned to enter their circle, I sat—their equal, how other?*

This presumptuous attitude brought about his downfall, for finite intelligence, however perfect in itself, can never vie with the intelligence that created it, and the only verdict possible is that of folly!

*Then broke smile into fury of frown, and the thunder of 'Hence, fool!'*

With this punishment so wonderfully described came also the discernment of what seemed to him the blindness of justice, and the positive injustice and inherent weakness of a never-ending penalty!



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Suffering had already taught him much, but it had now aroused in him a spirit of criticism of the power which gripped him.

In a passage of great literary beauty he reviews his conduct as a judge on earth, and while he acknowledges the limitations of human judgment shows how he would have treated the penitent law-breaker, forgiving, reclaiming and affording him a new chance, thus contrasting his conception of human kindness with the revengeful inhumanity of Zeus towards himself.

With what insight and sympathy does the poet enumerate all those minute and interior causes which spoil and ruin alike, the tree created to be erect of bole and straight of stem, and the man, formed in the image of God and destined to be His likeness.

How the heart goes out to the weakling, the ignorant, the criminal, the feeble, the foolish, the poor transgressor, the infirm of purpose! How he creates in one the desire to stay ‘the consignment to doom,’ to give ‘life to retrace the past,’ ‘light to retrieve the misdeed!’

*Thus had I done, and thus to have done much more  
it behoves thee,  
Zeus who madest man—flawless or faulty, thy  
work!*

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The natural eye can see only that which it brings with it the power to see, and this is equally true of the understanding. The mind of the early or unenlightened man, like the sight of an infant, sees only according to its experience and strength. It apprehends and realizes qualities and distances, for example, very imperfectly. At first ideas are bounded by needs, and connections are formed between these needs and their supply and slowly that which supplies becomes recognized and recognizable. Later it is found that desire expressed is understood and sometimes complied with, and gradually the immature human, builds up for itself, a human counterpart, stronger, larger and richer than itself, and forms a mental picture of a Power, sometimes good because it yields or soothes, sometimes the reverse because it thwarts or refuses; at times all smiles, at others grave or forbidding and yet again grieved, displeased and angry, even to the perturbed conscience, furious, tyrannical and unjust.

Somewhat after this fashion we may imagine arose the primitive ideas of God. All love and tenderness once, when the child heart in its celestial state asked only the gratification of pure and innocent desires from One Who was ever able and willing to give. But with the awakening of self-consciousness and the arrival of an ever-growing and persistent Selfhood, whose desires were no longer in compliance

with the Divine order, but born of a militant and exacting counter-will, a totally different conception arose and the likeness of the newly revealed human nature was thrown outward like a black veil confusing and altering and even partially blotting out the first divine ideal.

The humanizing of the Creator seems inevitable because man has no experience of any form of life higher than the human, and the study of the gradual clearing of the veil which hides the true God is the transcendent delight of the history of religious evolution and one of the surest tests of the progress heavenward of Man.

In his poem *Caliban on Setebos*, Browning gives us a primitive man's first concept of a Power—an irresponsible, autocratic, impalpable Being, a projection of Caliban's own nature.

Thus he asserts:

*Making and marring clay at will. So He  
As it likes me, each time I do. So He  
Would teach what must means  
Doth as he likes or wherefore Lord? So He  
Also it pleases Setebos to work  
Use all his hands and exercise much craft,  
By no means for the love of what is worked,  
Shall some day knock it down again. So He  
And there is He,—and nowhere help at all.*

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Yet even the savage Caliban had some dim idea that beyond Setebos there was another—Higher, Better, Whom he calls ‘The Quiet.’

Here in the poem of *Ixion*, Browning traces an advance. Zeus is more definite than Setebos, he is a king, cruel, but not so aimlessly cruel—a friend of man, though uncertain of temper, jealous of rights, revengeful and quick to punish. He has created man, not like Setebos just to ‘vex’ him, but that:

*His feats observed, should gain the approval of man.*

who admiring, might fear him and be his ‘cherished minion,’ and flattering, patronized guest, just so long as he was humble and subservient.

But Ixion is no longer satisfied. Raging against the god he had invented and idealized before his trial, to whom he says he had ‘lent the glow of his nature,’ ‘warmth to the cold, with light covered the black and the blank,’ and ‘clothed with the grace of the human,’ he now criticizes his own creation and comparing it with the self which suffering has been gradually evolving and purifying and awakening to fresh valuations of its environment, he becomes aware that Zeus was a fictitious god—a dead likeness of his dead self and not only, not his equal, but his inferior.

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He tells us how he had believed that:

*Love should be absolute love—faith—in its fulness  
or nought*

and when Zeus offered friendship and confidence:

*Faith in me sprang to the faith, my love hailed love  
as its fellow,*

*‘Zeus, we are friends—how fast! Heré, my heart  
for thy heart!’*

So did Ixion vie with the godships and fall. His dream god failed him. He had put faith in a shadow and tried to embrace a cloud! Now on his wheel of suffering, he recognizes this, and his own superiority as man is revealed to him and he claims the superiority and announces himself ‘Man henceforth and forever,’ for in the low estate of his bodily torment he recognizes something in himself which is above the creature of his imagination and exclaims:

*You to aspire to be Man! Man made you who  
vainly would ape him:*

*You are the hollowness, he—filling you, falsifies  
void.*

Here, in the grandeur of manhood, in the self-consciousness of that Divine image implanted in him, he might have rested the victim of a pride more deadly than the former. But in suffering is Progress! Ixion may despise and condemn the inflictor of his punishment, but that does not release him from it.

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There is solace in that fine spirit which rises above pain, either of mind or body, but the pain remains and the soul needs more than the help it must extract from itself or the strength which is only that of its own exertion.

Bound and helpless as to the body, the mind wings upwards in its agony of need and weakness to the Potency beyond all human conception—the Potency who calls from beyond the rainbow in a soundless Voice of beneficent goodwill. Towards this Voice, when the inner storm grows quiet through its own violence, the human soul turns. It is so worn and spent—so lost in the mazes of its own questionings—so weary of punishment—so sick of disappointment and despair of itself that its necessity becomes the Divine opportunity.

*So, through the thunder comes a human voice  
Saying: 'O Heart I made, a Heart beats here!  
Face, My Hands fashioned, see it in Myself!  
Thou hast no power, nor mayst conceive of mine,  
But love I gave thee with Myself to love,  
And thou must love Me, Who have died for thee!'*

The prodigal looks homewards. Hearts meet across the void. The wheel still carries the body that is bound upon it, but the soul of the Ixion is no longer resisting—no longer resenting the ceaseless whirling, for his spirit is free, yielding itself without

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complaint to that which is becoming, for it a purpose of Love, instead of a ‘purpose of Hate!’

Such seems to be the main purport of the poem. Man cannot escape the results of his actions, for them he is responsible, but the law is one of mercy, not of revenge. The very word punishment tells its own tale. It comes, Professor Max Müller tells us, from an old Sanscrit root, meaning to purify, and there is no vindictiveness in purification, only and altogether—it is Love!

Above him, ‘arching his torment’ formed by his sorrow, labour and dying, ‘the tears, sweat and blood’ wrung from him, ‘in a sparklike spray of flesh become vapour through pain,’ ‘an iris ghost-like startles the darkness’—‘justifies, glorifies pain.’

Having once grasped the end and purpose of suffering, the flesh may shrink in its weakness, but the soul will approve and of its own will consent to travel along that rough road towards the joy set before it.

*Spurn but the traitorous slave, uttermost atom,  
away,  
What should obstruct soul’s rush on the real, the  
only apparent?*

Thus, in this curious and pathetic symbolism, the poet reveals the experience of all true mystics, of

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suffering as the gateway to joy! Death as a necessary prelude to the eternal Living, and the completeness of the Self Death, as the one measure of the abundance of its Life.

It is through the suffering and the death that man comes slowly to know and worship the true nature of the God he thirsts for. Moment by moment, hour by hour, the lower earthly nature passes outwards in a 'sparklike spray'—unseen but real, whilst the Being from whom it is drawn is as constantly 're-framed, refashioned, refitted,' by a purpose, not of hate, but of Love.

The summing up of this poem comes like a trumpet call, 'To Arms!'

How the heart-throb of Browning's intense human sympathy and of his life-long belief that man's falls and failures, his blunders and blindness are all within the circuit of Divine Love, passes like an electric current to every other kindred heart!

*Strive, mankind, though strife endure through  
endless obstruction,  
Stage after stage, each rise marred by as certain  
a fall!*

So throughout man's knowledge of Time, the God in him, though only 'in the germ,' has striven and has attained, in spite of every temporary defeat caused by the beguiling and betraying of his spiritual



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nature by the physical and the psychical which clothes it. With the indomitable courage of his Divine parentage he still struggles upward making his very weakness ‘in the body or soul . . . clothing the entity Thou’ a ‘Medium whence that entity strives for the Not-Thou beyond it,’ the ‘Fire elemental . . . the All.’

Seventy years of Robert Browning’s life had elapsed when he wrote these words of good cheer. He had known the hardships and hollowness of manifold obstructions, the disappointment and discouragement, when,

*Nothing is reached but the ancient weakness still  
that arrests strength,*

when,

*Pride and revenge and hate and cruelty—all it has  
burst through,*

*Thought to escape. . .*

is found by the poor human soul, ‘fresh formed,’ to be withstood again and again, when, even Victory brings with it a flood of evil results which threaten to engulf all past attainments and man finds himself once more face to face with his lowest self—the brutal and the sensual!

The wheel of life still whirls and thereon, fast bound as to circumstance, but free as to his spirit,

*Man pays the price of endeavour. -*

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Here the poet finds the soul's mystical opportunity.

*Then, ay, then, from the tears and sweat and blood  
of his torment,  
E'en from the triumph of Hell, up let him look and  
rejoice!*

Why rejoice? Because beyond all the suffering, the heartbreak, the despair, there abides an Influence which vivifies a deeply growing faith in man's heart that he is not the victim of a senseless imagination of evil, but a sentient Being in a state of progressive becoming, into whom has been breathed the breath of Lives. Over his head the Rainbow of Hope speaks to him of an hour, when the Day of Probation past, he will attain a true manhood and in the strength of the Divine Potency of Love, rise a Victor over all obstruction into a Purity begotten of his own free will and desire.

*Out of the wreck I rise—past Zeus to the Potency  
o'er him! . . .*

*Pallid birth of my pain,—where light, where light  
is, aspiring  
Thither I rise! . . .*

Six years later, these glowing words found their echo in the last he ever wrote. For over half a century he had written of the Love, he loved with such a grandeur of abandonment—written of It on the wall of the Nation's Life, for all humanity, and still

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to the last, his eager desire was for his fellows, that they might not grow indolent or forget!

*At the midnight in the silence of the sleep time,  
When you set your fancies free,  
Will they pass to where—by death, fools think,  
imprisoned—*

*Low he lies who once so loved you, whom you  
loved so,*

*—Pity me?*

*Oh to love so, be so loved, yet so mistaken!*

*What had I on earth to do*

*With the slothful, with the mawkish, the unmanly?*

*Like the aimless, helpless, hopeless, did I drivel*

*—Being—who?*

*One who never turned his back but marched breast  
forward,*

*Never doubted clouds would break,*

*Never dreamed, though right were worsted, wrong  
would triumph,*

*Held we fall to rise, are baffled to fight better,*

*Sleep to wake.*

*No, at noonday in the bustle of man’s work-time*

*Greet the unseen with a cheer!*

*Bid him forward, breast and back as either  
should be,*

*‘Strive and thrive!’ cry ‘Speed—fight on,  
fare ever*

*There as here!’*



# THE WORKER



## THE WORKER

*All the breath and the bloom of the year in the bag  
of one bee:*

*All the wonder and wealth of the mine in the heart  
of one gem:*

*In the core of one pearl all the shade and the shine  
of the sea:*

*Breath and bloom, shade and shine,—wonder,  
wealth, and—how far above them—*

*Truth, that's brighter than gem,*

*Trust, that's purer than pearl, . . .*

ONCE upon a time in a Poet's vision, a countryman, on his way to his daily labour, passed slowly along a narrow lane, somewhere in the North Countree. On each side of the little lane, a tangled grassy bank stretched upwards to the hedge above it. Nestling here and there amongst the grass, a small flower which seemed to reflect the sunshine of the early spring, in its pure, pale yellow disc, might have caught the labourer's eye, but Wordsworth tells us that to 'Peter Bell,' it was 'a yellow primrose and nothing more.' Just a little ordinary every day flower, doing its best to offer to the Great Creator, its mite of thanksgiving for life, innocence and beauty. Yet this same flower to the poet's inward sight, contained hidden within it, 'thoughts too deep for tears.'

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Throughout all creation, there is ever the outer and the inner, the manifest and the spiritual, recognizable exactly according to a man's gift of vision, although, thanks be to the Divine Creator, enjoyment smiles in each. The writer of the book of Ecclesiasticus asserts: 'All things are double, one against another: and He hath made nothing imperfect.' Thus writes also Dr David Smith, 'The visible world is the counterpart of the invisible and the familiar things which we behold and handle are the adumbrations of the things unseen, and reveal the things unseen to seeing eyes and understanding hearts.'

The poem of *The Boy and the Angel* is the life story of a human primrose, who imbibed a desire to become a glorious sunflower. As a literary work it is apparently one of the simplest of Browning's shorter poems—apparently, because the poet was consciously or unconsciously led to give forth Truth not as a gem displayed on a salesman's counter, but as secreted in the shell of a living organism to be brought to the light of day, by those, who, as he says, 'Must dive by the spirit sense.'

The story, for Browning is always dramatic, is condensed into forty two-lined verses and each one brings its own contribution of delicate colouring and detail towards the full loveliness of the whole.



## ‘THE BOY AND THE ANGEL’

It is a poem written about a boy, for all those who are still young in heart and soul. Arthur Symonds calls it a ‘parable poem.’ One, he says, ‘of the most simply beautiful, yet deeply earnest, of Browning’s lyrical poems.’

On the other hand, an able American critic of Browning’s works, classes it with three other poems, in which he says, ‘the indubitable touch of genius is absent.’ May not this verdict depend on what genius really is and on how it reveals itself?

Suppose it is yielded that in these simple lines there is no evidence of the poetic skill and nature worship, such as reached its highest expression in those thrilling words:

*The grass grows bright, the boughs are swoln with  
blooms,  
The shining dorrs are busy, beetles run  
Along the furrows—ants make their ado.  
Above, birds fly, in merry flocks, the lark  
Soars up and up, shivering for very joy;  
Afar the ocean sleeps; white fishing gulls  
Flit, where the strand is purple, with its tribe  
Of nested limpets; savage creatures seek  
Their loves, in wood and plain—and God renews  
His ancient rapture—*

Suppose, further, it is allowed that in it there is no magnificent analytic display, such as Browning gives us in *The Ring and the Book*, no hunting down of secret causes in the nooks and crannies of some

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erring human soul, no tortuous path to tread of argument or relentless sifting of thoughts and instincts and impulses in the mysterious recesses of a man's mind. Suppose all this wonder of intellect be yielded to what is called genius. Does nothing of it remain? Has it no other form? Is there no genius in putting all heaven into a dewdrop and the Creator's joy into a lowly cobbler's shop?

Dr T. R. Glover writes in his book, *The Jesus of History*, 'One of Jesus' great lessons is to get man to look for God in the commonplace things of which God makes so many as if Abraham Lincoln were right, and God did make so many common people, because He likes them best.' And again he says, 'Look at the men who followed Him, at the type He calls. They are simple people in the main, warm hearts and impulsive natures.'

Writes our poet:

*What girl but, having gathered flowers,  
Stript the beds and spoilt the bowers,  
From the lapful light she carries  
Drops a careless bud? nor tarries  
To regain the waif and stray;  
'Store enough for home'—she'll say*

*Am I all so poor who—stealthy  
Work it was!—picked up what fell:  
Not the worst bud—who can tell?*

## ‘THE BOY AND THE ANGEL’

So there are multitudes of God’s ordinary yellow primroses in this old world of ours, living quiet, little-known lives in out of the way bye paths of life, in a land which to some of them and always to Him is holy.

Robert Browning often showed his love for the workers of the world; brought them out of their hiding-places and let God’s sunshine fall upon them. He knew that not one of them could fade or fall without the Father’s knowledge and permission. One of his most famous poems is of a little mill girl and how she did God’s work by being happy and singing along the streets too joyous to be silent.

And what of Michal? Is she not a beautiful type of womanhood? unobtrusive, loving, motherly, eager only to help and comfort, that poor great man, her husband’s friend? She is only a face at a window, only an ordinary hausfrau, but how lovable! Well might they say, ‘Sweet Michal.’

And in our great cities, going hither and thither and in the lonely places of the country-side, there they are the everyday people patiently doing their work with but little appreciation and less praise. Humdrum toil, most of it, whether with head or hands—in the house, the schools, the shops, the offices, the fields. There they are, young, middle-aged and old, often tired, often feeble, unthought of

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by the world and often patronized by their richer and so-called more fortunate brothers and sisters.

In this poem, of *The Boy and the Angel*, Browning in definite form, glorifies these folk who earn their living and are in truth the backbone of the nations.

Now to find the comfort and the blessing in these forty short verses, we must, alas! pull the 'bonnie wee thing' to pieces, must break the husk to find the kernel and the heart to find its love.

In a humble little home, later called a cell, so small and poor was it, a working boy practised the Presence of God. Hour in, hour out, 'Praise God,' he said. He was young, unknown and poor, but hard working and earnest minded and the Presence was his joy. He lived somewhere, we do not know where but the Presence knew. There is no mention of his work but somehow the spirit of the poem breathes of a cobbler's shop and one sees him, a curly-headed lad, sitting on his bench, stooping over a shoe between his knees, straightening himself ever and anon to say: 'Praise God.'

In the reality behind the appearance, by the way, a cobbler's trade is one of much importance, because the shoes of a man's life are apt to get out of order, and then his stepping is uncertain and he stumbles. Let him therefore keep his shoes in good repair, for it matters vitally to a man how and what he thinks

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concerning the observance of the great standing orders of morality and religion—the protective shoes of human conduct.

Into this calm secluded life of the boy Theocrite was cast by the innocent remark of a kind and admiring friend the seed of discontent.

An untried soul is of unknown worth. It does not know itself and is unaware of its true relationship to God. By means of the opportunity of temptation, as Robert Browning so frequently shows, the subconscious working of the selfhood discovers itself in some outward form. This may be, and indeed very frequently is, of the nature of a catastrophe, although one which may and often does lead to the awakening of the sleeping soul.

Given an ardent, generous nature, ignorant of its hidden and uncomprehended self and the soul is ready for the seed sowing.

The words of ‘Blaise, the listening monk,’ fell upon the boy’s ears and fired his imagination.

Said Blaise

*Well done;  
I doubt not thou art heard my son:  
As well as if thy voice to-day  
Were praising God, the Pope’s great way.  
This Easter Day, the Pope at Rome  
Praises God from Peter’s dome.*

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*Said Theocrite, 'Would God that I  
Might praise Him, that great way, and die!'*

It is to be noticed here, that it was not the bad but the best in him through which temptation came, and that *I* was the danger point. In a moment the boy's 'I' was stung into prominence! In a moment the spontaneous outleap of his heart to God, had become confused with the consciousness of how he praised. He had never before thought of that, but only and solely of Him he praised.

Now he felt that his praise—was not—could not be equal to that of the revered Pope at Rome. Ah! he sighed, if only he had been such a man, in such a position—been dedicated entirely to the service of God, he would, yea, he knew he could have offered his sacrifice of praise in that 'great way.' Then he should have been heard of God more graciously and been able to serve Him more befittingly.

Here is a very old temptation. The loving soul is deflected from the object of its love and guided by its self love to correct the wisdom of the All-wise and to criticize the judgment of the All-good.

Some two thousand years ago, penned within the narrow limits of a small and despised country, a working man, poor and of no great reputation, but with a soul on fire with love to God and man, was offered the possibility to save the world in his own way and by Power.

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In himself he knew he had the power but, was it His Father’s power or his own? The fierce temptation was met and cast aside again and again, and he who was to be victor over all things accepted the lowly life of apparent failure to which it had pleased God to call him, and as a recent writer says, ‘shared with us the universal law, that he that ‘would save his life must lose it.’<sup>1</sup>

*But He took the burden great  
Of the toiler’s work and sweat,  
And the Carpenter of Nazareth  
Did labour consecrate.*

*And He bore the self-same load,  
And He went the same high-road  
When the Carpenter of Nazareth  
Made common things for God.*

‘Unwritten Sayings of Our Lord’

Dr W. C. Smith.

*Night passed, day shone  
And Theocrite was gone.*

The little cell was empty. Silence reigned. But around the throne in Heaven swelled and rose and swelled again the endless cadences of angelic rapture and archangelic joy! All Heaven was full of praise, and yet—the Divine ears were listening for some other voice.

There was one He did not hear.

<sup>1</sup>Ed. Grubb, M.A.

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*God said in heaven, 'Nor day nor night,  
Now brings the voice of my delight.'*

What an inspiring thought is this of our great poet! And one, too, so typical of him. The fund of love and tenderness in his own nature made him always sensitive to that in others and also to that same love in God—of which, indeed, all pure human love is but a reflection.

The All-Father does not think of us in masses or Societies or Churches, not even in families, but, as each individual is an independent infinitesimal atom, so to speak, of His own Being, something, that is, which He gives of and from Himself and which must sooner or later yield its natural response, so does He think of and love the one, so is each soul in its profound solitariness, that to Him, which no other soul is or ever can be.

Such is the sublime thought which Browning suggests of the depths of the Divine self-fulfilling love.

*Man lumps his kind i' the mass,  
God singles thence unit by unit.*

One voice was silent. According to this world's 'Coarse thumb and finger' one insignificant boy's revelation of a soul's joy and thankfulness was unheard and Love missed it, desired it, listened for it.

Thus teaches the Poet of the human heart, that



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the infinite greatness of the All-Loving and All-wise, is fulfilled in His infinite care for the infinitely small.

*All service ranks the same with God  
Each only, as God wills  
Can work—God’s puppets best and worst  
Are we; there is no last or first.*

For the service of praise even of the least known and unappreciated toiler, though unheard and unacknowledged by the world, is of real consequence to the Almighty Father.

Such is the height, breadth and depth of Browning’s comfortable words.

It is a very old belief that each human soul has its own attendant angel to guide and guard it along the devious paths of life, and the poet has here given that of Theocrite into the charge of the Archangel Gabriel.

As there is no time in the eternal world neither is there space nor place. Gabriel was equally in the presence of God and in the soul of Theocrite.

The great mystic, Swedenborg, teaches that in the Spiritual world, rank is according to the soul’s state of truth or wisdom, and that in the celestial world where Love reigns, it is in the degree of Love’s self-sacrifice. So when

*God said in Heaven, ‘Nor day nor night  
Now brings the voice of my delight’*

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an Angel heard and understood.

*Then Gabriel like a rainbow's birth,  
Spread his wings and sank to earth;  
Entered in flesh, the empty cell,  
Lived there and played the craftsman well.*

Dr Glover has reminded us that eager impulsive souls that love and do not stop to count the cost are often chosen of God for special service and are dear to Him. Here surely is a lovely picture of an impulsive Angel—one, who in the ardency of his affection and zeal forgot that perfection is in the true union of wisdom with love.

One motive only stirred this beautiful creature, to do God's will and render Him a passionate service of loving praise. Thus Gabriel

*Morning, evening, noon and night  
Praised God in place of Theocrite.*

Limiting himself to the earthly life, he entered the changes of time and space.

*And from a boy, to youth he grew:  
The man put off the stripling's bue:  
The man matured and fell away  
Into the season of decay.  
And ever o'er the trade he bent,  
And ever lived on earth content.*

So old age gradually crept upon him. Strength and

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energy decreased, physical weakness and weariness assailed him, but patiently as of yore,

*He did God's will; to him, all one  
If on the earth or in the sun.*

Yet after all, the poet tells us, this loving self-sacrifice did not—could not altogether achieve its end, possibly because the inner nature of an angelic being and that of the human are on separate and different levels. Love is the actuating principle of both, but in the Angel it seems to be more of an intuitive impulse, in the man more as a bare seed sown in him, to be developed with difficulty and effort by the indwelling spirit of Life.

*God said, ‘A praise is in mine ear  
There is no doubt in it, no fear;  
So sing old worlds, and so  
New worlds that from my footstool go.’*

God heard the praise. He knew the song. Older creations for long ages had sung it. It was without flaw—without doubt—without fear.

*I miss my little human praise,*  
said God. Here our poet touches that which is very deep and very wonderful.

Away behind us in the ages, what worlds have been evolved by the Creative Power of the Divine Logos, we do not know. The keenest intellect, the most penetrative mind can never pierce the ineffable

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creation of that, by us, called the eternity of the past. What they are we only guess after a very limited fashion and then, even imagination utterly fails.

Nevertheless, we divine in the secret places of thought and insight that there once came a time, speaking according to human language, when in the superb unfolding of the

*New worlds that from His footstool go*

God, the great Artist, saw, while still uncreated, another world, in which a state of immaturity should be gradually developed into an infinite progression of perfecting.

And looking, as it were, through all the intervening stages of discipline, trial and ultimate victory, God saw that it was good—yea, very good. For it should be an idealism, in which each completed state of the evolving soul should be not an ending but a fresh beginning, whose new fulfilment should be again only a link in an endless chain, ever following after, but never quite attaining the infinitely Perfect, yet finding in every stage of becoming, renewed ecstasy, in its increasing goodness, loveliness and power.

This development, according to the poet's idea, would be brought about in its initial stages by a process of learning by contraries. To the new crea-

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ture, Man, failure should be the urging herald of success, hatred unfold the beauty of love, and the practical experience of evil bring about a profound desire for the absolute good, which is holiness.

The human should thus be enabled to offer a voluntary self-devotion of love and service, even the devotion of a free will, choosing good and fighting against the thralldom of a spurious self hood for an hereditary divine freedom.

Browning was always intensely interested in this problem and it constantly crops up in his poems.

*God said, ‘A praise is in mine ear,  
There is no doubt in it, no fear.’*

The clear strong love of the Angels is dear to Him, but the tremulous anxious affection of his human child, its oft-times despairing struggle for faith against its doubts of every kind—its fear, which makes it tightly clasp its Father’s hand, striving to trust Him in its weakness and its darkness with all its present and its future—this is something which to child and Father is infinitely more dear.

Out of the glories of the heavenly places, we feel the Father in His great love stoop towards that little cell, we call our world to listen with the tenderest desire for each fragile note of human praise and thanksgiving.

For humanity wants God, not because of its per-

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fection but because of its deep, agonizing sense of weakness and imperfection, which ultimately in the counsels of the Highest produces an enthusiasm for love and purity.

Here then is the Divine growth in weakness, but says Robert Browning:

*The weakest shall stand the most strong*

not truly through any inherent strength but through the uplift of the Father's indwelling love which perfects the Divine strength in man's weakness; the Divine self-fulfilling for eternity in creatures who must for ever remain voluntary recipients and responsive givers of the Divine to the Divine.

Meanwhile, what of Theocrite?

It appears that just about this time a mortal sickness overtook him and that

*In his cell when Death drew near  
An angel in a dream brought cheer.*

*And rising from the sickness drear  
He grew a priest . . .*

It was an ordinary idea in times gone by that a man's life might be saved by entering into a sort of contract with the Almighty,—the consecration of the man to religion on the one hand for renewed earthly life on the other. To become a priest or in some fashion a devotee was the usual manner of it.

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This illness may have been a physical result of hard work and insufficient food, accelerated by unexpected trouble of mind; or it may have been a sickness of the soul due to discontent with the providence of God and distrust both of Him and of its own worth and sincerity. Was he not called to go out into a new world, in which he might, yes, he really might attain to the Popedom and thus serve and praise God worthily in the Pope’s ‘great way’? He was enamoured by the prospect. So was this young soul tempted through its best and strangely enough Browning makes the Angel the agent of the temptation to desert the work and place appointed him.

*I bore thee from thy craftsman’s cell  
And set thee here; I did not well.*

*Thy voice’s praise seemed weak.*

Was it that in his intense zeal to please his God he underated the love of God for his newest creation? and overlooked the law of the Human, that only through obedience and love could it enter into its highest, only rise by stooping, only live by dying? In heavenly spheres there is no time.

*With God a day endures alway,  
A thousand years are but a day.*

In our dreams this is also a frequent experience. Thence Browning seems to suggest that to the soul

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of Theocrite, inebriated by the idea of a great future, this thought took form and was presented to his mind as an accomplished fact. Like Balaam of old, he fell into a trance, having his eyes open—those psychic and spiritual eyes which see the unseen.

In his vision an angel brought him cheer, and he arose—left his cell, donned the priest's robes and eventually stood on Easter Day, arrayed in the holy vestments, ready for the Great Act of worship, the greatest in the whole wide world. Theocrite had gained his wish—he was the new Pope of Rome!

Here in the wondrous Church of St Peter, he waited in the tiring room for his hour to come—the hour, the great hour, and while he waited

*all his past career  
Came back upon him clear  
Since when a boy he plied his trade,  
Till on his life: the sickness weighed*

And now who was he? Standing there alone with God—who was he?

Then suddenly in a vision within a vision the old habit of thanksgiving asserted itself. He turned, obeying that strong impulse of faith and love and adoration towards God, which is symbolized ever by the East and from his heart flowed forth once more, the involuntary praise so long withheld. Theocrite was saved!



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*To the East with praise he turned  
And on his sight the angel burned.*

It was *his* angel,—the angel of the cell, that wondrous angelic presence who for love had lived the lowly life in the meagre cell of the boy’s heart, had worked for him, praised in him, loved him and who now assumed the blame for the self love which had threatened to spoil all.

*I bore thee from thy craftsman’s cell  
And set thee here; I did not well.  
Vainly I left my angel sphere,  
Vain was thy dream of many a year.  
Thy voice’s praise seemed weak: it dropped—  
Creation’s chorus stopped!*

Thus does Browning speak to the men and women in this life’s workshop and one thinks the message comes out of his own heart, his own experience. For he also is one of God’s craftsmen and a living craftsman too, still able to reach and stir the souls of his fellows. He loved them while on earth, no doubt he loves them still and thus strives in the veiled words of this beautiful story to strengthen all other workers, who from time to time feel their praise too weak to penetrate the archangelic choir and reach God’s ears, with that comfort wherewith he himself had been comforted.

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‘Never be discouraged,’ he says, ‘If discontent  
born of a false humility assail you—’

*Go back and praise again  
The early way...*

so that amidst the heavenly music, God may not  
‘Miss the little human praise’

*Back to the cell and poor employ  
Resume the craftsman and the boy!*

What was the early way?

Was it not the complete forgetfulness of self?  
the spirit of the little child who trusts and enters  
Heaven? To this self-forgetfulness Theocrite must  
go back. But how? He was no longer an unconscious  
child. Since those first days in the little cell, he had  
grown, had become self-conscious!

When Childe Roland, in his quest of the Dark  
Tower, turned into the wrong road, he says:

*Pausing to throw backward a last view  
O'er the safe road, 'twas gone; grey plain all round  
Nothing but plain to the horizon's bound  
I might go on; nought else remained to do.*

Like Childe Roland, Theocrite was possessed of his  
past. He must go on although the order was, ‘Go  
back, praise God the early way.’

Is there not here the story of the incoming tide—  
of the bowler, before he throws his ball—of the soul  
that must become again, a little child? Is it not true

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that all spiritual advance means the recurring withdrawal of the will into the secret places of prayer until the consciousness of self is lost in the love and service of God? Tennyson writes of this same truth in lines of exquisite beauty

*Love took up the harp of life and smote on all its  
chords with might,  
Smote the chord of Self, that, trembling, passed in  
music out of sight.*

Thus Theocrite awoke from his dream, arose from his sickness and braced himself once more to do God's will and offer praise in the lowly cell and in that station of life to which he was appointed. When at last old age came upon him after a lifetime of humble toil, and his work was done, the Angel of the Presence passed with him from his little earthly home and together still

*They sought God side by side.*

So ends this simple yet beautiful story of the outward and inward life of a working boy, but was that all that Browning had in his thought? Robert Browning as we well know, was a deep thinker and the mysteries of man's origin and being had an immense interest for him. His was that strong and adventurous spirit which ever strives to reach the heart of Truth.

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Like the enlarging circles of a falling pebble into water, Truth is never confined to a point, but dilates and spreads and grows from the centre to the circumference, from the bud to the flower, from the comparatively known to the unknown, from the natural to the spiritual. Truth has no limits, except those of the mind into which it is cast. All poets and especially the poets of humanity must be practised in perceiving that which is above and that which is below the superficialities of appearance. Browning was not one who displayed his deepest in plain crude forms, rather did he hide it under parabolic words.

‘Art,’ he says in the farewell lines of the *Ring and the Book*,

*... Art may tell a truth  
Obliquely, do the thing shall breed the thought,  
So write a book shall mean beyond the facts,  
Suffice the eye and save the soul beside.  
And save the soul!*

In the telling poem called *House*, he says to those who pry into his secret mind:

*Unlock my heart with a sonnet key?  
Invite the world as my betters have done?  
No, thanking the public, I must decline.  
A peep through my window, if folk prefer  
But, please you, no foot over threshold of mine.*

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*Outside should suffice for evidence;  
And who so desires to penetrate  
Deeper, must dive by the spirit sense.*

Thus it seems as if in that hidden house of his thought, he possibly saw in Theocrite, not only a mere boy, but *Man*—man as he was in the so-called beginning, young, immature, new to life and living. ‘Praise God,’ man cried at first and walked and talked with his Creator in untried, untarnished happiness and love. He was formed to be a working man, not an idler, dependent on Divine doles. He was to work out his own salvation in sweet co-operation with his God and Friend. His little cell was to him most beautiful and day in, day out, he sang, ‘Praise God.’

‘Does man praise God for nought?’ was once asked in the old Jewish poet’s imaginary Parliament of Heaven.

‘Behold he is in thy hand; but spare his life,’ was the reply.

So the adversary assumed form and the Boy-Man, immature, untrained, inexperienced considered the Tempter’s word and his self-love, in its self-joy and young self-confidence was snared. His praise stopped. His point of view was changed, a profound discontent seized him. Certainly, he thought, was made for higher things than work, for a larger

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life than that assigned him. Had he not been created in the image of God? Should he not, therefore, be as God and have Knowledge, Power? So did the Divine in him fall asleep in a great soul-sickness with death hovering over him.

And still in that great swoon man sleeps and dreams and still the All-patient One waits and in front of each soul is the Forever.

*With God a day endures alway  
A thousand years are but a day.*

But man is not alone! The Angel of the Presence watches over him, works in him, suffers with him and the yearning love of the Creator ever listens for His 'little human praise.'

Now and then, here and there, a great voice cries 'Awake, thou that sleepest'—and now and then, and here and there some soul-depth stirs, half wakens, speaks of half seen, half forgotten memories of that which once was before he fell asleep. And some souls strive to awake fully and live in the reality and so work upwards towards the goal of high mysterious desires and instincts.

And ever the strongest of all, is to be as God knowing good and evil. Slowly, very slowly, the apprehension grows that God-likeness must be attained, not by self-assertion but through self-sacrifice and the obedience of Faith.

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*In this first  
Life, I see the good of evil, why our world  
began at worst:  
Since time means amelioration, tardily enough  
displayed  
Yet a mainly onward moving, never wholly  
retrograde  
We know more though we know little, we grow  
stronger though still weak,  
Partly see though all too purblind, stammer  
though we cannot speak.*

And always the everloving Angel of the Presence  
permeates the dream, supporting, comforting and  
ever leading towards that time when the full life of  
Power, which is Love, stirs and awakens.

Thus Browning sums it up in a *Reverie*:

*Somewhere, below, above,  
Shall a day dawn—this I know—  
When Power which vainly strove  
My weakness to o’erthrow,  
Shall triumph. I breathe, I move,*

*I truly am at last!  
For a veil is rent between  
Me and the truth which passed  
Fitful, half guessed, half seen,  
Grasped at—not gained, held fast.*

*I for my race and me  
Shall apprehend life’s law;*

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*In the legend of man shall see  
Writ large what small I saw  
In my life's tale: both agree.*

*As the record from youth to age  
Of my own, the single soul—  
So the world's wide book: one page  
Deciphered, explains the whole  
Of our common heritage.*

*How but from near to far  
Should knowledge proceed, increase?  
Try the clod ere test the star!  
Bring our inside strife to peace  
Ere we wage on the outside, war!*

\* \* \*

*. . . . .  
Leap of man's quickened heart,  
Throe of his thought's escape,  
Stings of his soul which dart  
Through the barrier of flesh, till keen  
She climbs from the calm and clear,  
Through turbidity all between,  
From the known to the unknown here,  
Heaven's 'Shall be,' from Earth's 'Has been'?  
Then life is—to wake not sleep,  
Rise and not rest, but press  
From earth's level where blindly creep  
Things perfected more or less,  
To the heaven's height, far and steep.*



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*Where, amid what strifes and storms  
May wait the adventurous quest,  
Power is Love—transports, transforms  
Who aspired from worst to best,  
Sought the soul’s world, spurned the worm’s.*

*I have faith such end shall be;  
From the first, Power was—I knew  
Life has made clear to me  
That, strive but for clearer view,  
Love were as plain to see.*

*When see? When there dawns a day,  
If not on this homely earth,  
Then yonder, worlds away,  
Where the strange and new have birth  
And Power comes full in play.*







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